

Background to the 2017 black interior trial.

I've been building my own swift boxes since 2005. Through hours of observation and study I've tweaked my designs to incorporate any 'advantage' I could in the quest for the ultimate swift box.

At the beginning of 2016 I had a mixture of 17 different swift box designs. 13 bottom entrance boxes of various lengths and sizes and 4 Zeist boxes with front entrances. The boxes were fitted on 3 sides of my house - 4 South, 5 North and 8 West. The South and North sides only had bottom entrance boxes fitted. The West side had a mixture of designs, 4 bottom entrance boxes and 4 Zeist boxes. That year 6 out of the 9 boxes on the North and South sides were occupied by breeding pairs. In comparison only 2 out of the 8 on the West side were occupied (1 Zeist & 1 bottom entrance).

Having cameras in most of my boxes I could observe the behavior of any bird that entered them. One thing that puzzled me at the time was why the boxes on the West side were less popular than those on the North and South sides.

That summer I observed swifts entering all the boxes on the West side, but they never really stayed that long. This was most evident in the Zeist boxes. Single swifts would enter these, have a quick look around and leave almost immediately. None ever settled down on the nest cup. To me they looked nervous and always in a hurry to leave.

By contrast their behaviour in the bottom entrance boxes on the West side was markedly different. Single swifts often stayed inside these boxes for 15 minutes or longer and regularly sat and preened themselves on the nest cup.

Why the apparent differences in behaviour? The aspect was the same so I didn't think it was that. The only other thing I thought it might be was the actual box design. The Zeist boxes with their front entrances let in considerably more light than the bottom entrance boxes. This was particular evident on bright and sunny days when the interiors of the Zeist boxes were extremely well illuminated when compared to the adjacent bottom entrance boxes.

So in April 2017 I carried out a small trial on the 6 unoccupied boxes on the West side. I painted 3 of their interiors black and left 3 unpainted. That summer all 3 painted boxes were occupied for the first time, one pair actually breeding. In comparison only 1 of the unpainted boxes was occupied. The number of breeding pairs had risen from 8 to 11.

In April 2018 I increased the total number of boxes from 17 to 25. I found from the trial that painting all of the interiors black it adversely affected the quality of the camera picture. So this time around I only painted the interior walls.

This year (2021) I had the most boxes ever occupied, 22 out of 25. In total I had 18 pairs, with 15 that had chicks. In another 4 boxes I had singletons roosting overnight. With over 30 chicks fledging it was another colony record.

2021 box aspect and occupation rates:

South - total number of pairs 4 (3 breeding pairs)

North - total number of pairs 6 (5 breeding pairs)

West - total number of pairs 8 (7 breeding pairs)

In the 8 Zeist boxes on the West side I had 6 breeding pairs, with singletons occupying the other two.

In conclusion I'm convinced black interiors make a difference in occupancy rates of Zeist boxes, especially if these boxes are fitted on the sunnier sides of buildings.

However I'm not so sure if black interiors make any difference to bottom entrance boxes or to boxes that are naturally dark inside by design or location.

These are my own personal observations.