Making buildings bird-friendly

Green Ecology Guidance Note — Updated October 2009

Building-nesting bird species

Swifts
Populations have declined by 41% in the last 15 years and could disappear by 2028 at current rates.

Swallows
As well as suffering from losses due to bad weather loss of nesting places in buildings is contributing to their decline.

Barn Owls
In 1999 there were estimated to be just 4,000 pairs in the UK. Developments and barn conversions are an opportunity to provide new nesting sites.

House Martins
Typically build mud nests under the eaves of buildings. Although still widespread there has been a moderate decline over the last 25 years and is an 'Amber list' species.

Starlings
With numbers declining across Europe, Starlings are a 'Red List' species. Many winter roost sites have disappeared from cities with buildings being designed to discourage birds.

House Sparrows
Studies show a 65% decline since the 1970s. The replacement and blocking up of eaves in old buildings and inaccessible eaves in new buildings has contributed to this decline.

Why birds need your help

Some bird species nest almost exclusively in buildings. Traditionally these birds would have nested in holes in trees found in Britain's original ancient forests. Once a bird has found a nesting hole many will return to their same place year after year with many species living for 15 years or longer.

Since World War 2 nesting places in buildings have declined dramatically with the introduction of building regulations requiring apertures to be fitted with insect grilles. More recent requirements for insulation will mean that building-nesting birds will continue to decline. If bird populations continue to reduce at current rates some species may all but vanish by 2030.

How you can help

You can help reduce this decline by following the advice included in these guidance notes during each stage of your development. These steps will help your development to enhance biodiversity in line with Planning Policy Statement (PPS) 9.

Existing Buildings:

Do not disturb nesting birds

You should not plan to carry out any work on roofs and walls where nesting sites exist between March and September. All birds are protected by the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and the EC Birds Directive. It is an offence to kill, injure or take any wild bird; take or destroy their nests or take or destroy their eggs. Special protection is provided for rarer birds listed in *Schedule 1* of the Act where it is an offence to intentionally or recklessly disturb a wild bird while it is building a nest or when it is in or near a nest with eggs or young; or disturb their dependent young. *Schedule 1* birds include Barn Owls.

Building contractors who disturb nests or nesting birds could face 6 months imprisonment or a £5000 fine for each bird or egg destroyed.

Identify existing nesting places

This is a straightforward job that should be carried outside of the nesting season. A boroscope can be used to identify nest remains in wall cavities and behind soffit and fascia boards. Sites that are identified can then be marked on the outside of the building and a hole is drilled through new material or leave a 150 mm area of existing stonework un-pointed around each mark.

Simple steps to help birds

It is easy and inexpensive to help building-nesting birds:

- Do not disturb birds at the nest (this means not working on existing nesting places between March and September).
- Keep nesting spaces that are already in place.
- Provide new nesting places in suitable buildings.
- Some organisations offer an assessment service to recommend where to site various types of nest places for several bird and bat species (see overleaf).

Provide new nesting places

Renovating old stone walls is an opportunity to provide new nesting holes. Slot a wooden batten in between courses through to the internal cavity behind and point around it. Remove the batten before the mortar has hardened.

New Buildings:

Wall cavities

Solid walls or full fill insulation are now replacing traditional wide cavity walls as a result of revised building regulations introduced in 2006. Although it is still possible to stay within maximum allowable thermal conductivity or 'U-values' with partial cavity walls, the new regulations place an emphasis on ensuring that the external envelope of the building is airtight, thus excluding birds. It is still possible to provide external wall cavities with 'missing brick' blocks specifically manufactured to accommodate cavity nesting birds.

Roof design

Make sure the eaves air gap for loft ventilation is big enough to access by nesting birds (at least 33mm). A plywood partition can be installed 30cm to 50cm inside the loft from the eaves ventilation gap with insect grilles fitted to ensure continued good ventilation whilst complying with thermal regulations.

Provide holes and gaps in soffits and fascia boards to allow access. You can also include roof tiles manufactured specifically for nesting birds.

Nest bricks

These are positioned in the top course of the wall and are a cheap and effective means of providing nesting places in new buildings.

Incorporate internal nest boxes

Internal nest boxes can be designed into plans for new buildings and can be easily incorporated behind soffits and fascias during the construction phase of the development.

Nest Boxes:

Some building-nesting bird species will move into nest boxes when eaves and cavities in buildings are unavailable. Nest boxes should be placed at least 3m above the ground in shade or out of direct sunlight out of reach of predators. Make sure the nest box is away from areas likely to be accessed regularly.

Helping specific species

House Sparrows

House sparrows prefer cavities in walls but will slowly move into nest boxes. They require an opening of 32 mm. Sparrows nest in colonies so try to fit 'terrace' boxes if possible (where one box has several nesting spaces all with separate access holes).

Starlings

Starlings prefer cavities in walls. Try to include access holes in the mortar when pointing old walls. Starlings require larger nest boxes with a 45 mm nest box opening.

Swifts

Swifts require a letterbox shape opening to nesting places approximately 65 mm by 25 mm to 35 mm. There are various nest boxes and bricks available that have been specifically designed for Swifts. Swift calls available on CD can be used to attract Swifts to buildings.

House martins

'Nest cups' can be fitted underneath eaves to attract House Martins. House Martins nest in colonies and nest cups should be installed close to areas already used for nesting. Nest cups are available either as modular units or as terraces.

Swallows

Swallow nesting cups should be installed in sheds, garages, barns and other outbuildings. Leave an access hole of around 70 mm by 50 mm under the eaves. Alternatively provide a simple nesting platform made from three small square boards and a backing board (high up in an outbuilding away from cats). Swallow nesting cups should be placed at least 1 meter apart to avoid conflict.

Barn owls

The Barn Owl Trust recommends designing in permanent nesting spaces inside barn conversions and other developments. Specific guidance can be found on the Barn Owl Trust website.

Planning your development.

In some cases there may have been bird population surveys carried out within the local area. Your county environmental records centre can carry out a data search for a nominal fee. Alternatively you may need to commission a bird and bat survey specifically for your development. Design features which accommodate birds all count towards BREEAMS/Code for Sustainable Homes with Ecology and PPS 9.

.

Useful sources of information and advice

Green Ecology (01647) 277594
www.green-ecology.co.uk

Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
(01767) 693690
www.rspb.org.uk

British Trust for Ornithology
BOT (1842) 750050
www.bto.org

Swift Conservation (0207) 7942098
www.swift-conservation.org

Natural England (0300) 060 1110
www.naturalengland.org.uk

Nest box and nest brick suppliers

Jacobi Jayne
www.jacobijayne.com

Ibstock Brick Ltd
www.ibstock.com

Schwelger Nature
www.schwegler-nature.com