

Information for Schools on resolving potential Health and Safety Issues with Swallow and House Martin Nests – July 2021

This information is to provide advice on our responsibilities in looking after buildings that have swallow or house martin nests. It has been put together with help from Huntly Swift Group - [Huntly & District Swift Group | Facebook](#). Several Aberdeenshire rural Primary Schools are host to nesting barn swallows and house martins. The Huntly & District Swift Group is keen to hear from Primary Schools who need advice or wish to champion their nesting swallows and/or house martins. The group can help with school visits, online presentations and teaching resources focused on the nesting birds.

Key points

1. It is illegal to remove a nest while being built or in use. Swallows, house martins and other breeding birds can have a long nesting season with several broods so care needs to be taken to protect nest sites during the whole season
2. Children love to see and find out about wildlife. Having swallows or house martins nesting at a school can be managed carefully to provide a great asset.
3. Swallows and house martins are declining in number and need our help to protect their nest sites. Retaining existing nest site is really important.
4. There are easy ways to prevent droppings from nests becoming a nuisance.

Background

Swallows and house martins have declined significantly in numbers over the last 20 years. They are not resident, escaping to warmer climes to over-winter, but substantial numbers arrive in the spring to breed and several council-owned and managed buildings have active nests.

Swallows and house martins need suitable nest sites to be able to breed successfully, available sites have reduced due to loss of old farm buildings, new buildings lacking appropriate nest sites and sometimes a negative attitude to birds nesting on buildings. They are declining in numbers for a variety of reasons. The loss of suitable nest sites and the willful removal of nests from buildings, are contributory factors. It is essential to retain old nest site wherever possible.

Swallows



Swallows sometimes use natural nest sites, such as caves and cliffs, but more often they use manmade structures. They return to previous nest sites in April and May, males arriving before the females, claiming and defending the nest sites. They are monogamous and may return to breed for up to three years. Swallows normally raise two or even three broods per season depending on the weather. Leaving in September and October, 'our' UK swallows overwinter mainly in South Africa.

Swallow nests are normally built inside a constantly open shed or building, on a beam or ledge and they are often not much higher than head height. The nest, built by both birds, is a deep bowl of mud with grass and other fibrous material and lined with feathers. They require cover above the nest, keeping it dry, relatively secure, and shaded. Single nests are common, but swallows often breed in small colonies of four or five pairs.

House Martins

House martins are also summer visitors, spending the winter in tropical Africa. Traditionally, house martins used overhanging cliffs and rock ledges on which to build nests, but house eaves mimic this habitat well and are more widespread. House martins tend to breed in colonies with many returning year after year. Their nesting period is slightly longer than swallows and the third brood can still be in the nest in mid-September.



Droppings

Droppings from both swallow and house martin nests can cause a nuisance if not managed resulting in a negative attitude to nests. There are easy solutions to this to prevent droppings marking windows, doors or gathering below the nest on other surfaces. Dropping of any kind can cause a potential health risk so take care when removing/collecting, wear gloves, wash hands etc.

1. Fix a black plastic bag or better still a bio bin liner so you can deposit it straight onto compost heap beneath the nest to catch droppings, this can be taken down and disposed of when the birds have left the nest.
2. Fix a board (wider than the nest) to form a shelf beneath the nest to catch droppings, this can be swept regularly to keep it clean and remove any droppings that have collected or make the ledges easily detachable to allow cleaning. Leave a gap between the nest and board so predators (cats/crows etc) do not gain access to the nest.
3. Use a tray/bucket/planter of soil under the nest as it is easy to remove droppings from the tray or bucket. Add droppings directly to the compost heap as it makes an excellent garden fertiliser.

Dropping of any kind can cause a potential health risk so take care when handling, wear gloves, wash hands etc!

Example of shelf to attach below a nest site to catch droppings (homemade or shop-bought)



The Law

Under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 ALL birds, their nests and eggs are protected by law and it is therefore an offence to intentionally:

Kill, injure or take any wild bird.

Take, damage or destroy the nest of any wild bird while it is in use or being built.

Take or destroy the egg of any wild bird.

For further help contact emma.williams@aberdeenshire.gov.uk or j.davidson@aberdeenshire.gov.uk.