

From feckless adolescents to model parents in 3 months The story of our swifts in 2018

We installed three swift nest boxes under the tiles on the east side of our house, behind the fascia, when we were having external wall insulation in 2011. We played their calls at the allotted time with no response - until last year. Two, presumably immature, birds tried the boxes for size and spent most of their time in box 1. They even stayed overnight.

In preparation for their return we upgraded the cameras and added two new nest boxes at the front of the house, this time easily accessible from a ladder.

We waited on tenterhooks as the strange 2018 spring unfolded. A small subset of Mark Glanville's large colony came back from 20th April to the first week in May, then nothing for two weeks. Eventually the rest trickled in including one of ours, with a short visit on 20th May. It came and went over the next days then reappeared with a friend on the 22nd and they were seen allo-preening (ie each other) and mating ! (Well, it's obvious in the video.)



22.5.18 22_8_23_49 B3

So far this was in box 1. On the 24th they were both trying out box 2. Overnight they had a box each.

By the 27th they were settled in box 1 and doing a spot of nest building but it never really became a proper nest.



25.5.18

We spotted our first egg on the 2nd June but neither bird was sitting on it. Another

egg appeared on the 4th. The eggs seemed to get kicked around the box, were occasionally sat on but rarely both together.



17.6.18

The number of feathers they brought in to the box increased. This behaviour, erratically sitting on an egg and occasionally two, went on until the 20th June when two broken eggs were found beneath the box. We concluded that they were feckless adolescents and would breed properly next year once they had grown up, having practiced the individual steps involved this year.

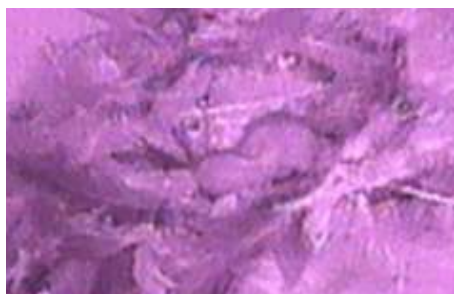
On 25th June we spotted another egg under an adult. Three days later at 9.50 I managed to get a video of the female laying an egg ! I had switched on and the bird was pushing down on her wings and seemed to be straining and restless. Then lo and behold, an egg !



28.6.18

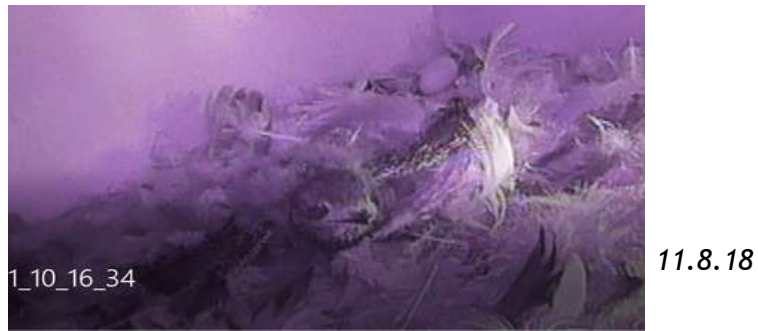
The former behaviour resumed with the birds sometimes brooding one egg, occasionally both, changing shifts and looking more parental but as far as we could tell, but not consistently brooding the same egg. There was some desultory nest building when they were on an egg. We were convinced that neither egg would hatch.

We went away for three nights on the 24th July and returned to find a tiny, ugly chick ! It seemed incredibly weak, its large head waving uncertainly on its long neck above a blobby naked body. We saw it being fed and brooded.



27.7.18

By 3rd August there were feathers visible. By the 6th it was being preened and had eyes open at times. On the 7th it was flapping its little wings and doing press-ups.



On 10th August at two weeks its pale face was visible against the dark feathers. It was lovely to watch the three birds snuggled together with much preening of one another. Our feckless adolescents had turned into model, caring parents.



16.8.18



30.8.18

By the 26th August the chick sometimes looked out of the box and stretched its wings. On 31st there was lots of wriggling and stretching and more looking out when alone. At 2200 on the 1st there was only one adult !

On 3rd September the chick was wing flapping and doing press-ups, the wings lifting the body off the ground for 1-2 seconds.



It also craned its neck to look above. That evening at 2100 it was at the door, looking out - and was alone !

By now we were desperately worried that it would not fledge and would need to be fed. Having gone so far we could not watch it die. Accessing the box is not for the faint-hearted and removing tiles from a ladder fraught with danger. The noise and disturbance would probably frighten the chick to death. Then what would we feed it on ? I contacted a swift carer (!) in Cardiff who would take it if necessary.



4.9.18

We waited with baited breath through the next day, 4th September. At 2100 the chick was looking out into the gloom. I watched for fifteen minutes and resigned myself to him not going and us having to foster him.

At 2200 there was no bird - he had gone. Relief ! Fledging so late in the evening is interesting. It's obviously safer from the predator point of view but since the birds normally fly around the nesting area, presumably orientating themselves before heading South, it's hard to see how this bird could manage that after 9pm on an overcast 4th September.

Given the shorter days, changing weather, cooler temperatures and less insects, Sept 4th is late. (We had seen no other swifts for some time. In July and August there had been some small screaming parties around the house which is encouraging for next year. Perhaps some were young prospectors though we did not actually see any enter the boxes.)

If it survives our young swift will now spend 2-3 years on the wing, landing only to prospect for a nesting site after that or, exceptionally, in extremely cold weather when they have been known to form swarms on walls to keep warm.

Now we just hope that he or she will be safe and return here in the future, along with its parents. Meanwhile we will have to get the nest cleaned somehow. Apart from the pupae of parasitic flies there is the addled egg to be removed. What fun !