

Surrey's First Dedicated Swift Tower Installed On Shalford Common

Surrey's first dedicated swift nesting tower has been erected on Shalford Common to protect one of Britain's most remarkable and endangered bird species who frequently choose to nest there.

This stunning and very special piece of public art is the result of a collaboration project between Guildford Borough Council, Shalford Parish Council, The Friends of Shalford, Guildford Environmental Forum and Surrey Hills Trust Fund. It has been partly funded by a Section 106 contribution, a grant which is made by local developers to help provide amenities for the local community.

The partnership was initiated in 2018 and a celebratory opening had been planned but sadly due to the Coronavirus (Covid-19) outbreak has had to be re-scheduled.

The 10-metre-tall tower, constructed in steel and local timber, was designed by award-winning artist Will Nash and features 45 individually-numbered nest boxes, which can accommodate 90 swifts and their chicks, to replace lost nesting sites in an area where swifts have nested for decades.

Lead Councillor for the Environment, Cllr James Steel says:

"Will has created a fantastic piece of public art and I am delighted that we are able to help this fascinating species by protecting long-established parts of their habitat. The tower is an impressive feat of engineering and I am sure will also become a local landmark as well as being of significant regional importance to our wildlife. I look forward to seeing the tower become a thriving hub for an increasing local swift population."

Cllr Alan Midgley, Chairman of Shalford Parish Council says:

"We are delighted to have been part of this project and to see it come to fruition providing a haven for the swifts who are such an important part of the character of the village. We are grateful to all the parties involved for the hard work in completing the tower during these very constrained times."

Cllr Gordon Jackson, Chairman of Surrey Hills Trust Fund says:

"Providing habitat for our wonderful wildlife to thrive across the Surrey Hills is at the heart of our Trust Fund's mission. Will is an inspirational artist. I am sure the tower will provide a great, much-needed nesting place for swifts and be much-loved by our communities and visitors."

Modelled on one of the great works of 20th-century sculpture, the Endless Column by Romanian sculptor Constantin Brancusi, the tower is sustainably clad with UK-grown cedar shingles and was created in consultation with Edward Mayer, founder of the Swift Conservation Trust.

The swift accommodation is split across eight storeys on the top four metres of the tower, with each of the 45 'apartments' numbered to assist with monitoring. A solar-powered audio system has been installed to play pre-recorded swift calls to attract birds to the tower.

Sussex-based conceptual artist Will Nash has frequently worked with community groups and in specific

locations to create bespoke sculptures that are often characterised by geometric explorations. He is best-known for his 4.8-metre-tall Space Hopper Pyramid installation, featuring 298 space hoppers and created in aid of testicular cancer; a giant game of table tennis played with a pendulum on the Kent coast; a stainless steel portrait of 50 community workers in Eastbourne; and Elevation, his 12-metre-by-5-metre light-reflecting work made of laser-cut brushed steel panels. Nash has received a number of awards, including the Sir Leslie Joseph Young Artist of the Year award in 2001, and was shortlisted for the Jerwood Sculpture Prize 2009. Nash also led a bird box-making workshop with pupils of Shalford Infant School, as part of the project.

He says:

“I was attracted to the project by the challenge of making an artwork that was also a viable habitat for a particular bird. Swifts ideally need a drop of at least six metres from their nest, so the tower had to be tall. The shape of the tower was drawn from several sources, including the need to have multiple eaves and to make something aerodynamic so that it doesn't catch the wind. This resulted in a shape drawn from nature like a seed head, pine cone or a cocoon.”

Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB) figures suggest that the UK lost 53% of its swift population between 1995 and 2016, largely due to the loss of nesting sites through the demolition of old buildings, declines in insect numbers caused by pesticides, and climate change. There are currently estimated to be 87,000 pairs of swifts in the UK, with up to 15 pairs of swifts returning to Shalford each summer.

The swift, which is on the Amber List of Birds of Conservation Concern, nests in England each year from the end of April until the beginning of August as part of an annual 14,000-mile migration from equatorial and southern regions of Africa. This makes it one of the longest migration journeys of any bird.

It is the world's fastest bird in level flight, reaching speeds of over 69 miles per hour. They fly continuously day and night, and only land to breed every year. They eat, drink, mate and even sleep on the wing by resting each half of their brain in turn. Swifts can fly almost 500 miles in one day, and 1.25 million miles in their lifetime. After leaving their nest for the first time, they fly non-stop for three years but always return to their birthplace to mate.

Swifts are distinguished by their dark, sooty colour, pale throat, long, narrow wings, very short legs, slightly forked tail and screaming call. The average lifespan of a swift is six years, but the oldest recorded swift was at least 21 years-old. When feeding chicks, an adult swift can collect 100,000 insects a day for their young.