

# Ludlow Swift Conservation Group

## Report for 2011 season

### Introduction

The Ludlow Swift Conservation Group was launched in January 2011 at the AGM of Ludlow 21 with the support of Shropshire Wildlife Trust and Shropshire Ornithological Society. Swifts are an important part of the Ludlow skyline in summer and many residents and visitors alike look out for them and enjoy their company each year. However there has been no systematic surveying of these birds to understand where they nest or any assessment of their numbers to see whether they are thriving or struggling to maintain numbers.

The aims of the group in its first year were to

- Get an idea how many birds there are in and around Ludlow
- Find where they nest and how successful they are at raising young
- Plan what can be done to preserve and create new nest sites

### Surveying

#### Dates and Locations

The first swifts were spotted on the evening of 30<sup>th</sup> April – perhaps slightly later than might have been expected given the relatively warm and dry spring. Each Thursday evening during May, June and July a group of between 3 and 10 went out to a different area of town to identify nesting sites. Most of the surveying was done in the centre of town – within ½ mile of the Buttercross. The eastern part of the town around Sandpits Avenue was also surveyed as this area is known to have a significant swift colony. The last Thursday that the group went out together was 28<sup>th</sup> July when the numbers seen flying were already starting to decrease. By 6<sup>th</sup> August the majority of the swifts had left.

Nest sites were observed at 54 separate locations. Some buildings, notably Chapel Works and Ludlow College, have several nests and this gave an overall total of 72 identified nesting sites. In general nest sites were observed in older buildings and were in spaces in brickwork near roofs and in eaves. However one nest site was observed in a broken brick above a window. Frequently drainpipes were close by – perhaps the installation of rainwater pipes leads to small holes being made available. It was encouraging to find nests in 2 locations on new build houses (within last 10 years) where swifts had found small faults in brickwork.

#### Timing

Despite initial concerns about being able to spot swifts entering their nests the group became very proficient at catching the second or two when a bird appears from the sky and swoops into a building. This always happened as the light had more or less faded – which could be ½ to ¾ hr after sunset on fine evenings. During May birds were seen going into nests around 20:40 but as the days grew longer this moved to just on 22:00 but then moved back to before 21:00 by the end of July.

## **Weather**

It was very noticeable how the weather affected the number of birds that were seen. On cool and/or windy evenings there were, more or less, no birds seen flying. It is thought that those that were nesting were in their nests well before sundown on those days – perhaps they had not even been out much during the cooler days. Conversely on warm, sunny and calm days large groups of birds were seen and it was only as the sun dropped significantly that they started flying around nests leaving it to the fall of darkness to either go into nests or to join those high in the sky that were clearly not nesting.

## **Breeding Success**

During June there was evidence of the young being fed during the day. There were certainly young birds in several of the nests that we were able to get close to. It was a surprise to be able to hear birds calling from the nests – and this appeared to be triggered by other birds screaming close by. Calling from nests was heard as late as 21<sup>st</sup> July. It is impossible to give any idea of how many young were raised.

## **Numbers**

It appeared to be a good year for the birds as ‘screaming parties’ of 40 or 50+ birds were seen at the height of the season. These could be observed over Sandpits Avenue, Linney and Ludford Bridge at the same time - so we were not just watching the same 50 birds in 3 or 4 different places. The roads in the area of town between Mill Street and Broad Street were often a focus of ‘screaming parties’ on fine evenings as this is also an area with a high concentration of nest sites. Groups of 20 – 30 birds were also seen over Lower Corve Street and along Gravel Hill. On warm evenings we often saw large numbers of birds gathering high in the sky as the breeding birds went to their nests. As these birds were very high only a very rough count of their numbers could be made – but groups of around 30 – 40 were seen. So subjectively it seems that 2011 was a better year than 2010.

## **Departure**

By about 27<sup>th</sup> July the large - and sometimes very loud - screaming parties of around 50 swifts had declined to around 20 birds that were much quieter. Suddenly after all the frenzied activity of the last 2 or 3 weeks it seemed as though it was time to think of heading south. The birds were appearing in their usual haunts much later in both the mornings and the evenings. By 5<sup>th</sup> August there were only 2 or 3 birds seen at Linney in the morning and by the evening they had gone.

Around 5pm on 12<sup>th</sup> August around 100 swifts were seen feeding over the Corve just north of Ludlow- it is presumed that this was a large group migrating south. The last date we have for swifts seen passing over Ludlow is 20<sup>th</sup> August.

## **Other Activities**

### **Engagement and Education**

- At the end of May the group had a display at the St Laurence Conservation Trust weekend. We talked to a lot of people about our work and also sold some of the swift boxes built by SkillBuilders CIC and swift call CDs purchased from Swift Conservation.
- During June and July the group’s display boards and information leaflets were in Swifts the bakers in Parkway, Ludlow. Again this raised awareness of the group and we were contacted by a few people – both in Ludlow and beyond – which gave some more information about local swifts.
- A talk was given at Ludlow Infant School .

- 4 newsletters containing information about the work of this group and also Swift Conservation have been distributed locally (and nationally and internationally via Swift Conservation)
- Many letters of objection were sent to New Forest District Council to condemn their actions which resulted in swifts being excluded from their nest sites. This issue now appears to be resolved although the birds have lost a breeding season.
- Nest site locations have been submitted to the RSPB swift survey.

### **Installation of Boxes**

A few boxes (up to 6) have been installed during this year's swift season by residents who are keen to provide new nest sites however a more systematic approach to installing boxes in suitable locations is needed.

Renovation work on a shop backing onto Quality Square gave an unexpected opportunity to install 3 boxes high in this area of town where swifts fly regularly but no evidence of nesting was seen.

Several residents have expressed an interest in installing boxes – either to encourage swifts or to try to persuade them to move out of attic space - and the group will try to work with, advise and where possible provide (for cost) suitable boxes.

### **Plans for the Future**

- Identify sites where installing boxes could realistically lead to new swift nesting sites.
- Continue to work with local producers on a range of boxes suitable for a variety of locations.
- Produce a pack of information for builders/developers and visit &/or talk to them to engage with them.
- Work with Ludlow Town Council and house owners who have asked for help in encouraging swifts to their properties.
- Work with local groups and schools to raise the awareness of these birds and the work that the group is doing and the support and advice that they can offer. This could involve devising a presentation that can be delivered to a wide range of groups.
- Engage with Shropshire Council and ensure that local Planning Laws protect and enhance biodiversity and to try to persuade them to adopt the standard set by Exeter City Council.
- Survey the swifts again in 2012 season to build a year on year picture of their numbers and nest locations.
- Consider surveying in Richard's Castle, Leintwardine and other villages close to Ludlow.
- Work with Swift Conservation and other swift groups to develop our understanding of the birds and the threats they face and the actions that can be taken to help them.

### **Conclusion**

- Surveying has shown there are currently a good number of natural swift nests in Ludlow. In the town centre the birds are using the old stone built houses as nest sites as well as the larger Georgian houses whereas, the significant colony at the eastern side of the town are nesting in houses built in 1930's.
- There is a need to continue to work with residents and builders to ensure that these nest sites are not destroyed and to supplement nest sites in appropriate locations.