

Ludlow Swift Group Newsletter

October 2014

A Week Late Arriving and a Week Early Leaving



Anecdotally swifts arrive each year with – or just before – the May Fair – but this year they were a little later than expected. The first swift was spotted in Ludlow on the evening of Saturday 3rd May and reports from across the area were received over the next few days. I heard my first screaming party of the year on 6th May. The numbers of birds increased over the next few weeks and even by the middle of May it is likely that many nest sites were occupied and eggs laid.

Although there were some wet days at the start of the swift season it was, overall, the best year for breeding that we have seen since the group started in 2011. June and July were warm but not too hot and the winds were light. The birds were able to find good food supplies to feed the rapidly growing young and we believe that they hatched and fledged relatively early this year. There were good signs of parents feeding young during the day at the end of June and during July. By the middle of July, when we had some very fine summer days and evenings, there were flocks of 50+ to be seen around town. As usual, as the season drew to a close the number of screaming parties increased and I spent a lot of time watching the birds in the early morning and late evening as they raced round in groups of perhaps 15 (hard to count when they are flying at that speed). They seem to do 3 or 4 circuits and it is hard to work out which bird (or birds) is screaming. The group then breaks up – only to reform a few minutes later.

The morning of Saturday 26th July was very busy with the usual end of season screaming parties – but then the evening was quieter than recent days. Surely this was too early for them to be departing? Usual departure date is right at the end of July or start of August. However on Sunday 27th July the majority of the swifts had indeed gone. This was the case across the whole country – so we wonder what is the trigger that tells these birds it's time to migrate? There were birds around for a few more weeks – perhaps they had bred late and still had young to feed. The last bird spotted going into a nest site in Ludlow was on 3rd August. But did the mass of birds leave early because they had raised young relatively early this year, so it was job done and time to leave? Who knows? So many unanswered questions with swifts and all our migrant birds.

On 8th August the last swifts were seen over Ludlow but we don't know if these were "our" birds or ones passing over on their way south. There were reports of swifts in other parts of the UK even at the start of September so it looks as though those that bred late stayed around to look after the young – maybe because the weather was so good. Let's hope that 2015 is equally successful.

Welcoming the Swifts

This year's '**Welcome The Swifts**' events were held at the end of May. The RSPB supported the stall at the Local to Ludlow market and the fine weather meant that many people stopped to chat to us about our work. We believe that these astonishing birds are as much citizens of Ludlow as we human residents and that we should help them as much as we can.

1. Local to Ludlow Market Stall



This display gave us the chance to publicise the work that we have done and to raise awareness of the problems that our swifts are facing.

As well as our new Swift Group postcard, we had a number of leaflets available, covering everything from handling fallen birds to how to make our houses 'swift friendly' as well as a range of informative leaflets provided by RSPB.

2. The Charlton Arms Weekend

On the evenings of May 24th and 25th we hosted '**Welcome The Swifts**' events on the balcony at the top of the Charlton Arms. Although it had been a wet day on 24th it was a fine evening and we saw good numbers of swifts from 6:30pm to 9pm.



Just as it was becoming dark we saw about 30 swifts together over the river – and they were then joined by a large flock of house martins. This is another species that is in serious decline so it was good to see these birds as well. There was a steady flow of visitors and good discussions about swifts. We were pleased to welcome the Mayor of Ludlow, Paul

Draper, and other Ludlow Town Councillors to the event.

Caring for injured swifts is a specialist task and not something that the Group is able to undertake. We are very grateful to **Cuan Wildlife Rescue** who care for any injured swifts that we find here in Ludlow. We sent donations received at the '**Welcome The Swifts**' to support their work. You can find out more about this local wildlife rescue centre at

<http://www.cuanwildliferescue.org.uk/>

We thank the owners and their staff of the Charlton Arms for their support during the weekend.

DIARY DATE - WELCOME THE SWIFTS 2015

*The stall at the Local to Ludlow Market will be on **Thursday 14th May** and the evening events at the Charlton Arms will be on **Saturday 16th and Sunday 17th May**.*

Swift Watch and RSPB Transect surveys

This was our 4th year of looking for swift nests in town – and we were delighted to welcome many new faces to our band of “swift watchers” this year. We were pleased to find many new nest sites – some in parts of town that we had not been to before. There are a lot of birds around Sandpits Road and Sandpits Avenue area as well as in the town centre and we would like to spend more time surveying this area in 2015. We also confirmed that there are birds on the back of the Community Hospital and this is a site we also need to keep an eye on. We will be submitting all our results to Shropshire Council’s Ecological Database, the County Bird Recorder as well as the RSPB’s swift survey.

Following on from the surveying we did in conjunction with the RSPB in 2013 to pilot a new way to assess the number of swifts we were asked to help again in 2014. This year we identified an area of the town centre where we know there is a high density of swift nest sites and also an area where there is a low density. A 400m route through each of these areas was identified and we were required to walk this once a week and record the number of birds that we saw. We needed to estimate whether the birds were within 50m or beyond 50m and also how high they were. This was sometimes tricky even in the low density area when the birds are moving rapidly and joining up with other birds. In the high density area trying to count 30+ birds and decide how far away they all were was very challenging at times. Then there was the evening that the swifts chased a sparrowhawk and it seemed as though all the swifts in Ludlow were racing down Mill Street – this was clearly a spurious result in our data collecting exercise but interesting to see. We have not yet heard back from the RSPB as there is a lot of data to be analysed but hope that our efforts are useful in their work to preserve swift numbers.

Planning

We take a very active interest in plans that are submitted for either new houses or work to older properties especially if they are in areas known to have swift nest sites. In our quest to build energy efficient homes we are forgetting our obligations to other species that are dependent on our buildings. There is legislation in place to protect and increase biodiversity but planners and architects are sometimes slow to implement this and follow best practice guidelines. This means we still need to keep a close eye on the planning register and comment where appropriate. Robin Pote gave presentations to members of Ludlow Town Council to raise awareness of the importance of these birds to the town and the challenges they face as buildings are renovated. Councillors were given information packs about the swifts and they agreed to add these birds to the list of species to be considered by Representational Committee whose remit it to consider developments in the town. As well as swifts, Ludlow’s last few swallows are being threatened by proposed developments in the last outposts of agricultural land around Coronation Drive. We are waiting to see what happens to the Old Chapel Works in Old Street where there are a number of swift nests on the rear of the building: this site is to be redeveloped and we are grateful to the RSPB to adding their support to our comments on this planning application. Proposed new housing on the Shropshire Building Supplies site could easily include swift bricks in the design – this is a good area for swifts and we should all be asking for biodiversity features to be included in such developments.

Boxes

We would like to report that swifts have taken up residence in the boxes that we have put up around town over the last 3 years: but they haven't. Perhaps this is a sign that we still have enough natural nest sites for the number of birds that come to Ludlow each year or perhaps it shows that our boxes are not quite attractive enough for some reason. After all, one of the artificial nest boxes that was put up at Wilderhope Manor has been used in its first year, even though there seem to be plenty of natural sites around the roof. There does seem to be some evidence that the birds prefer woodcrete boxes – e.g. Schwegler type boxes - to wooden boxes and many people claim that only by playing swift calls will birds take up residence. We will continue to put boxes up when suitable sites are offered to us and this year we were excited to be given the opportunity to put swift boxes above the Wool Shop in Broad Street.



This potential site had been mentioned to the group in 2011 and it was only this year when the renovation work on the property was carried out that we were able to access the space behind the gable and fit 3 custom made boxes. The entrance holes have been carefully aligned with the louvres. As there are no known swift nest sites in Broad Street (surely there must have been in years gone by?) we have also

installed a calls system to play at suitable times of the day during the breeding season. We will watch this site carefully to see if any birds investigate these wonderful new boxes. Many thanks to Gareth Thomas for designing, building and installing these boxes at short notice.



In many parts of the country it is the local church that provides the only remaining nesting places for swifts and the group has long been minded to see if Ludlow's swifts could be attracted to the tower on St Laurence's church. We were fortunate to be able to install 2 boxes as a trial in the east face of the tower this summer. This involved visits to measure up and decide how the boxes could be fixed without touching the fabric of the tower and then taking the

constructed boxes and necessary tools up the spiral staircase. Of course all this had to be carefully timed around the chiming of the bells as the boxes are installed in the bell chamber. Apparently swifts do not mind the noise of bells – and certainly the pigeons that currently use the church tower are not put off by the noise. These boxes, designed by Peter Norman, were installed by him at the start of July and a call system also put in place. Do let us know if you see any swifts investigating these boxes – it would be great to hear that the church tower here is used by swifts.

Swift Surveying in Church Stretton

You can read about the work done by the Strettons Area Community Wildlife Group to assess swift populations in the area at http://www.shropscwgs.org.uk/?page_id=2280

Other News

Cambridge International Swift Conference

8th-10th April 2014, Parkside Community College, Cambridge CB1 1EH, UK

Three of our group went to the conference in April and spent 3 days meeting up with fellow swift enthusiasts from around the UK and across the world. All aspects of swift work were covered – from studies of their flight using wind tunnel studies to advances in the use of geolocators to understand more about migration paths to many examples of work that have been done to preserve natural nest sites and the installation of boxes in many different situations. You can

read the summary of the all the presentations at <https://docs.google.com/open?id=0B3YAfjezSBIiOWM0cTVDV1pPdk0>



And indeed they do!

This cartoon appeared in the article **Citizen Action for Swifts** written by Dick Newell of Action for Swifts. It is in the May 2014 issue British Birds and can be read at

<http://www.britishbirds.co.uk/article/bb-eye-may-2014/>

The article below is taken from Swift Conservation website - <http://www.swift-conservation.org/>
There are now a number of swift towers in England and Northern Ireland and we hope to hear that they are being used. Certainly towers in other parts of Europe are occupied but will UK birds also use them?

Do remember to look at Swift Conservation's website as it is a great resource and has news of swift projects that are happening across the UK and Europe. Also Action for Swifts which is based in the Cambridge area also has lots of advice - <http://actionforswifts.blogspot.co.uk/>

Waitrose gets a Swift tower!

7th August saw the opening of Waitrose Malmesbury and the second store where the business trialled the objective of achieving no-net-loss of biodiversity as a result of their development.

To ensure proper management and care of the site, a partnership was established with the Malmesbury River Valleys Trust, who will look after, maintain and develop the wildlife area alongside two other nature reserves that they own within 1/4 mile from the site.

Local knowledge highlighted the need for bird and bat boxes and a suggestion was made to install a Swift tower. BTO data showed that a modest number of Swifts nest in the area and that a tower may help boost the local population.

A site was agreed and Stoneyford Engineering installed the tower the day before the store opened, just as this year's Swifts were leaving.

Next spring the solar powered calling system on the tower will be switched on to attract next year's returning Swifts. Keep your finger's crossed!



"We're all very excited about the Swift tower. Learning all about the unique needs of Swifts has been very interesting and we hope the Swift tower will create interest and raise awareness amongst the community as well."

Toby Marlow, Sustainable Development Manager for the John Lewis Partnership

Photo © Waitrose plc



Swift Boxes win RIBA Stirling Award..

... well not quite. But the winner of this year's award – the redeveloped Everyman Theatre in Liverpool – has, we hear, had 10 swift boxes included in the new building. This shows that award winning modern architecture can also be wildlife friendly – but we still seem to be at the stage of having to ask for it to be included rather than it being standard. Guidelines on how to improve biodiversity are readily available – we just need to make sure our planners and developers follow current best practice.

The theme of ***The State of the UK's Birds*** report (SUKB) 2014 is migrants - and swifts are one of a number of species that spend our winter in the humid zone of Africa. Along with other species that migrate to this area - such as nightingales, tree pipits and spotted flycatchers - they are all showing dramatic declines in numbers.

The introduction can be read at <http://www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/bbs/bbs-publications/sukb> and there is a link (on the right hand side) to download this year's report.

It's definitely worth a read.

So that's it for 2014 – we look forward to continuing our work for swifts in Ludlow in 2015 and hope we can count on your support.