

# Ludlow Swift Group

## Report on the 2015 season.

### Introduction.

Now that the Ludlow Swift Group has been in existence for a number of years, the areas where swifts nest in the town are becoming quite well known. Equally within those particular areas or 'hot spots', the actual nest positions are also becoming familiar. To enable us to increase our knowledge and widen the database of known sites it was decided that 2015 would see a departure from our historical method of weekly 'swift watches' and concentrate more on targeting specific areas with specific watchers.

### Swift watchers at The Charlton



It had been agreed at the end of 2013 to hold the 'Welcome to the Swifts' events again this year. They took place in the second week of May to ensure that there were swifts in the sky for visitors to see. As usual, the first event was a market stall on a 'Local to Ludlow' Thursday and, as usual, the weather was less than welcoming! However, swifts were in evidence and it did enable us to publicise the weekend events taking place at the Charlton Arms on the 15<sup>th</sup>

and 16<sup>th</sup>. These were a resounding success with many people joining us and enjoying low-flying swifts in large numbers. We were also able to record our first sightings of birds entering traditional sites as well as a new site on a nearby building.

### Looking at the local map.



These events are important to keep the work that we do in the public eye and, once again, we had good support from the local newspapers in the form of articles about swifts and about the events we were holding.

## Local Schools

This year it was decided to take our message to some of the local schools to see if it was possible to enthuse younger Ludlovians. Consequently, Peter Norman visited Ludlow Infant's School on Sandpits Avenue and Robin Pote gave a PowerPoint presentation to Ludlow Junior School. The Infant children were encouraged to let their teachers know of sightings they made of swifts and swallows around their homes and this proved quite successful with quite a good number of birds recorded. It had been hoped to get the Junior children to fill in simple sheets of sightings they had made but a lack of support from the school was evident!

## Arrivals

2015 began with great promise as swifts were reported returning to nest boxes very early in Northern Ireland. In fact, it was the 16<sup>th</sup> of April, almost 2 weeks before an expected date for Ludlow. Despite these early arrivals elsewhere, Ludlow's swifts were slightly later than usual and took some time for numbers to build up. It was during this build-up of numbers that we held our welcome events and the new season was looking very promising. However, it soon became apparent that a number of traditional and regular sites over the years were not occupied this time. Two regular sites in Mill Street did not have their swifts back and numbers nesting in Victory House were down on previous years.

The build-up of birds continued to disappoint and it was apparent that the evening screaming parties, and 'kettles' of birds at dusk, were smaller than we were used to. It was fair to say that all of the 'hot spots' identified around the town had nesting birds but all seemed at a lower density than we had come to expect.

Contradictorily, sites that had not been occupied last year had birds in them in 2015. One such site was The Manse Cottage in Bell Lane. Equally, a small number of brand new sites were discovered, notably one in Quality Square, very close to three of our nest boxes! Might this bode well for 2016?? It would be great if it did as we are still waiting for our first Ludlow box-nesting swift. [More of this later]

Given the constant stream of excited posts submitted by the Swift Local Network chat group [SLN] Ludlow is lagging woefully behind other parts of the UK in getting swifts into boxes. We continue to console ourselves with the fact that we have very good numbers of nesting swifts in Ludlow, that we are undoubtedly under-reporting the complete number of sites and that the very nature of the town and its buildings does not need artificial sites to maintain its population. However, continued gradual

renovation and large numbers of proposed new houses means that we must be ready to provide alternative sites for the future. They may not be used often, or for some years to come, but, just like the housing stock for UK citizens, available they must be for the time when the crunch comes!

## Nest Records

After a meeting between the group members it was decided that giving recorders the freedom to collect data whenever suited them was going to be the best way to utilise their dedication. A group of around a dozen were given recording packs containing record sheets and local maps and asked to record time, place and position of swifts entering buildings. We agreed to meet about once a month at the Church Inn to report progress and exchange information.

Without the small band of dedicated recorders that we have, monitoring swifts in Ludlow would be extremely difficult. Those of us who have been involved for several years are becoming quite efficient, but we cannot cover the whole town and do still need more help. Anyone who has been involved, however casually, with the process will know how time consuming and frustrating it can be to confirm even a single site that you are almost certain is going to be occupied. Consequently, confirming new sites, with no certainty that a bird might turn up, can occupy a whole evening and have a nil return. Having adopted this approach, it was left to the recorders to collect the data for inclusion in our end of season records.

One other feature that became apparent was that the number of birds seemed to increase in July. Presumably these were 2 and 3 year olds returning to prospect for sites to occupy in 2016. If this is the case, then this may result in a more productive year. It will be particularly interesting to see if this is the case. It will be especially interesting to see if productive sites of 2014 such as 12 Mill Street, and others, are reoccupied in 2016.

There was a least one case of a nest failing and the photo shows a young swift picked up at the very beginning of August. Sadly, the bird was already dead but it can be seen that it was close to another week to go partially in their as can happen, or August is when possibly, have



beginning of August. Sadly, the dead but it can be seen that it fledging. It probably had as its flight feathers are still sheaths. It may have fallen out, attempted to fly to early. Early the adults leave so it could, been abandoned!

## Results

Compared to previous years, 2015 has proved to be disappointing in the number of nests recorded. However, there is evidence from throughout the country of some unusual patterns in nesting this year so this is to be expected. It is equally true that as our coverage of the town increases there are going to be fewer new sites added each year. What has to be done now is to consolidate the records by trying to confirm as many as possible each year. This is important because as well as having a maximum population we need to monitor any fluctuations within the town. This is important to see if they mirror the position nationally as well as being indications of rises and falls in the nesting population. As a species in decline and under threat from loss of nest sites, the situation in Ludlow, with its widespread range of natural sites, is important to monitor.