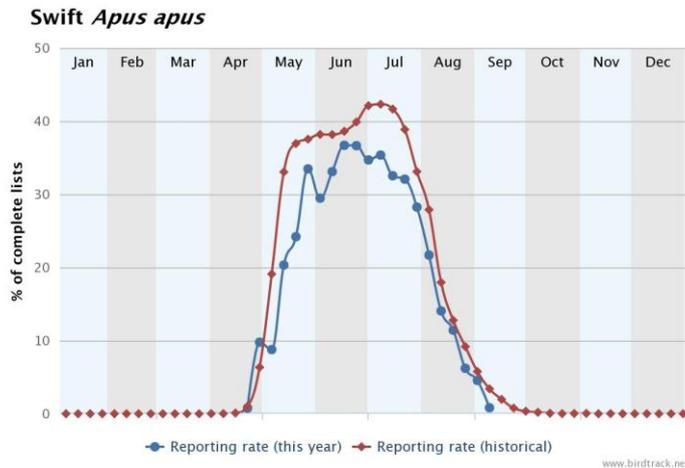


# Ludlow Swift Group Newsletter

September 2018

The first sighting of a Swift came from Clee Hill on 24<sup>th</sup> April. I then received reports of Swifts back in nest sites from May 1<sup>st</sup> onwards. However it was a strange and difficult start to the Swift season across the whole country. Although, as usual, the first birds were back around the start of May (these are the breeding birds) there were then several weeks when bird numbers just did not build up as expected.



This graph from Birdtrack shows that by the start of June numbers were well below the historical average for the time of year – and that continued for the rest of the season.

It is believed that bad weather over France and Spain at the height of the migration season together with reports of a particularly bad sandstorm over the Sahara were responsible for the non-arrival of not only Swifts but many other migrant birds this year. Whether they perished or abandoned their migration this far north is unknown.

I know of several nest sites that were not used this year and there were several groups of 7 or 8 birds around town looking for nest sites – repeatedly flying up to buildings and investigating them. Whether they found nooks and crannies in our world of super sealed housing remains to be seen.

There were some great screaming parties around during the fine evenings of mid-July – on one walk around town I saw 4 or 5 groups of around 30 birds – so non-breeding birds were, in the end, here in good numbers. It was, however, noticeable that the screaming parties in Mill Street were much smaller in 2018.

Please do let me know about nest sites you are aware of – were they used or not this year?

Although the large screaming parties stopped around the 29<sup>th</sup> July there were still quite a few Swifts seen around town in the first 2 weeks of August. So perhaps it was not the mass exodus that we have seen in previous years with just a few stragglers around in early August. There were certainly a lot of late chicks this year and perhaps parents stayed after the young non-breeding birds, that are the main members of the screaming parties, had departed.

We were particularly interested to see if Swifts would return to the nest site that they had created in 2017 in the boxes installed in the belfry in St Laurence's church. And they did! A swift chick was seen looking out of the box on July 26<sup>th</sup> – this is typical behaviour of a chick that is about to fledge. We watched closely over the next few days and we believe it left overnight on 29<sup>th</sup> July.

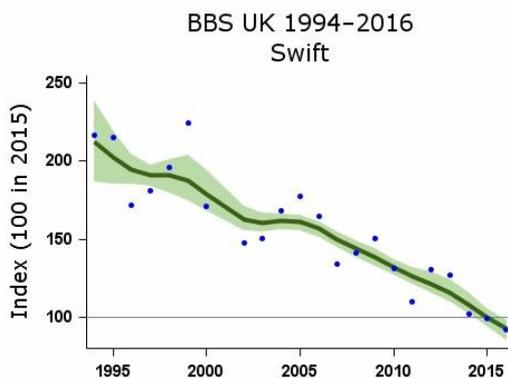
Although up to 10 birds were occasionally seen around the tower it was just one pair that bred there in 2018 but we hope that more of the boxes will be used in future years.



We will continue to play the calls there as this really does help attract Swifts to nest boxes.

This picture, taken on 10<sup>th</sup> September well after the Swifts had left, shows the nest box after it has been used by the chick. Adult birds do not leave droppings in the box – all these are from the chick.

Swift volunteers are installing Swift boxes in many church towers across the country and take up is good which is encouraging as this could be an important way of offering new nesting opportunities. The church in St Neot's now has 12 pairs of breeding Swifts and it is estimated that there are 350 boxes in use across Cambridgeshire.



Swift numbers have declined by 50% in just 20 years and the rate of decline shows no sign of abating. Loss of nest sites is thought to be the major reason for the decline – there are many towns and cities that have lost major colonies of Swift due to unsympathetic reroofing projects. And it still happens – streets with old terraced housing have large scale reroofing projects where hundreds of old roofs are ripped off and replaced by new super sealed roofs with no nooks and crannies for Swifts. Unbelievably this work is sometimes done when Swifts are actually

there and nesting and although strictly illegal it happens and Swifts are lost forever unless perhaps a resident speaks up for the birds.

The huge decline in the loss of insects is also likely to be affecting the food supply of Swifts and many other insect eating birds.

“Lost” is perhaps not the right word here – in truth we have knowingly, or unknowingly through poor awareness of our environment, destroyed them.

Love him or loathe him Chris Packham's People's Manifesto is definitely worth looking at <http://www.chrispackham.co.uk/a-peoples-manifesto-for-wildlife>. There is reference – amongst much else – of the need to provide Swift nesting sites in all new build and also retrofitting boxes to existing homes. Great news – we just need to make sure some of the ideas happen. It really is up to us.

Back to churches - we were delighted to hear that Swifts have returned to St Mary's Church in Ashford Carbonell. As you remember the roof was replaced in 2017 and the Swifts were unable to access their nest sites on the north side of the church. Thanks to Stephen Treasure and the Gammon Brothers who were all involved with the repair work existing nesting sites were, where possible, retained and new sites were created when the new roof was installed.

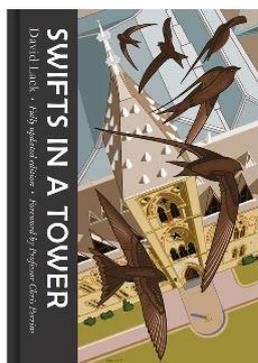


Above is a nest site at the end of one of the timbers that protrudes through the wall. It looks a very small hole for a bird with a wingspan of 45cms to enter at speed – but it is these sorts of nooks and crannies that Swifts need.

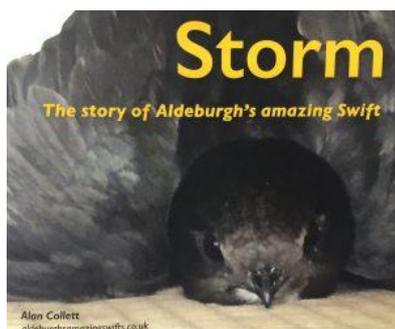


6 holes have also been created in the wallplate and the one shown above was used this year.

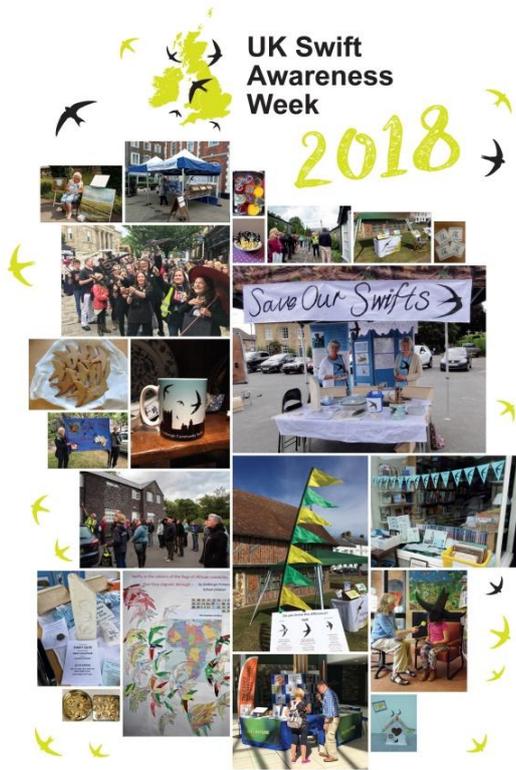
Thanks to Gareth Thomas for the photos and his time at the church both in 2017 offering advice and in 2018 to monitor the Swifts' return.



"Swifts in a Tower" by David Lack was reprinted as part of the Oxford Swift Project and is still **the** book that tells you everything you want to know about Swifts. Shropshire Swift Group has donated 6 copies to the county's libraries so do call in to Ludlow Library and borrow one for some winter reading before the next Swift season.



*Stop Press News* – this lovely book written by Alan Collett of Aldeburgh's Amazing Swifts for young readers will soon be available from Shropshire Libraries. It tells the story of a Swift chick who was born here and how he was rescued. After just a little rest and help he was able to make his first journey to Africa for our winter.



Co-ordinated by Swifts Local Network

There were over 90 events across the country to celebrate the first **Swift Awareness Week**. To show that this is a community activity not an event for 'birders' the poster shows the wide range of creative ideas people had to raise awareness about these birds – and also other urban birds and wildlife that need our buildings. In Ludlow there was a display about Swifts in the library and the mid-summer Swift walk organised by Shropshire Wildlife Trust's Ludlow branch was enjoyed by around 50 people. Unfortunately there were not that many Swifts around that evening but we looked at some traditional and new nest sites around town. At the Swift stall at the Local to Ludlow Market we chatted to visitors to the town but sadly there was little interest from local people. Likewise the annual Swift Watch event at the Charlton was poorly attended.

When there had been so much media coverage about Swift Awareness Week it was somewhat disappointing that local people did not want to know more about our efforts for Swifts here in Ludlow.

**Swift Awareness Week** in 2019 will be from Saturday 22<sup>nd</sup> June to Sunday 30<sup>th</sup> June – yes, strictly it's more than a week but many find the weekend is a good time to hold events. Perhaps you have some ideas about what we can do here in Ludlow in 2019?



Good to see some very nice Swift bricks installed in the gable ends of the new Betjeman Lodge development. Well done Churchill Homes for including biodiversity features in their housing. We need to work with builders, developers and architects to make them aware that Swifts need homes as well as people and that there are many easy and cheap options for including Swift bricks in new build.

Perhaps you have contacts in the building trade – architects, scaffolders, builders, roofers etc that you could talk to about Swifts and persuade them and their colleagues to be Swift friendly?



The Swift boxes installed on the new petrol station on Coronation Avenue are, in truth, far from ideal. While these good boxes (sold by the RSPB) are suitable for Swifts they have not been installed in suitable locations here. They need to be about 5m high with a clear flight path and these boxes which have a flat top do need to be tucked under eaves to keep them weatherproof. Sadly none of these criteria are met here but I hear that sparrows have found them. As this is another bird in severe decline (perhaps not so much in Ludlow but think of London where they have gone almost completely) this is a good use for the boxes.

Many ask "Why are you recording Swifts" but it is only because we have recorded nest sites across the town over recent years that Shropshire Council have now, sometimes, started asking for Swift bricks and boxes to be installed.

So it is important to

- a) continue monitoring nest sites
- b) look at planning applications and comment where appropriate re the presence of Swifts and ask for Swift boxes or bricks to be included.

If you are building an extension or have access to your eaves because of work on your house please do put up a Swift box. They are relatively cheap and easily available – contact me for information [ludlowswiftgroup@gmail.com](mailto:ludlowswiftgroup@gmail.com).



The planning system is there so that we can all shape the future of our town. We need to ask for biodiversity features otherwise we will end up with a soulless town – we need trees, Swifts, House Martins, Hedgehogs etc etc but unless we use the planning portal to ask, we are unlikely to see provision for these included. So do make your voice heard and support the Swift Group's comments on planning applications. The planning ecologists at Shropshire Council have told me that they would like to be overwhelmed by people asking for Swift bricks, hedgehog corridors etc. so let's overwhelm them!

Did anyone see Swifts using the Pepper Lane nest sites this year? There are (or were) 3 or 4 nests along the rear of the Bull Ring shops that had been used for many years. However the building works there this year have, I believe, stopped using the birds accessing those nests in 2018. Will they come back in 2019? Or have they been lost forever? As the birds used the space that has now been built on to fly through to access their nests they are going to have to learn a new access route if they do return.



I tried hard to persuade the developers to include Swift nest bricks in the development but sadly they only installed one – do look hard at the picture to spot it!

This could have been an ideal location for many Swift bricks and an opportunity to encourage more birds to Pepper Lane and keep up the population of Swifts that we have in the town centre.

Swifts are the ideal lodgers as they are clean birds and only here for 12 weeks each year so I feel this was a missed chance despite my best efforts.

And this is what has happened in so many places – a nest lost here, a nest lost there and suddenly places that used to have Swifts no longer have them and we all lose.



## Cuan Wildlife Rescue

Cuan Wildlife Rescue in Much Wenlock

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

Swifts taken to them again this year and the final chicks of the year were released at the start of September. They are not the easiest birds to feed and care for and we are fortunate to have such a dedicated team of wildlife specialists here in Shropshire.

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There is much happening across the whole country for Swifts.

The Swifts Local Network continues to grow and you can see the spread of groups at <http://actionforswifts.blogspot.com/p/swifts-localnetwork-sln.html> There is much news about projects across the UK - and further afield at [actionforswifts.blogspot.com/](http://actionforswifts.blogspot.com/), [www.swift-conservation.org](http://www.swift-conservation.org) and [www.bristolswifts.co.uk](http://www.bristolswifts.co.uk) .

Finally if you want to keep in touch with what is happening across Shropshire join our Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/shropshireswiftgroup/>

So, that's it for 2018. Swifts are important here in Ludlow and across the country so do please support the group and, importantly, keep an eye out for "our" Swifts and ensure there have places to breed in 2019 and beyond.