



# Swifts in the Strettons 2014



## Summary

There are good numbers of swifts flying over the centre of **Church Stretton**. Two significant areas around the town centre have been identified as hot spots for swift nest sites - 19 nest sites have been located in and around High Street and Church Street. These sites are, as would be expected, in older buildings that have useful nooks and crannies for the birds to build their nests in. They also have clear flight paths into the buildings and screaming parties of up to 14 birds were frequently seen along the High Street quite often at head height.

There appears to only be one house in **All Stretton** that now has swifts. Installing suitable boxes and call systems in appropriate neighbouring properties could help to rebuild the colony here.

Again, in **Little Stretton**, swifts were only found at one location and this was hard to access. Trying to extend the colony size here could be worthwhile as both these villages would seem to be in danger of losing swifts altogether. Swifts usually breed in colonies with several nest sites in a small area. The presence of only one nest site in each of these villages is of concern as once lost it is hard to attract birds back to an area.

Looking for swifts going into nest sites can be time consuming but, now that the main sites have been identified in 2014, it is suggested that these are checked to see whether the birds continue to use all the sites each year. New sites may be found but they are likely to be in the vicinity of sites located this year.

The Shropshire Council planning portal will show planning applications for any proposed work on buildings known to house swifts and it is recommended that a comment is submitted to ensure that the planners are aware of this and suitable provision made for the nests to be maintained or mitigating measures taken. Other works that either need Building Control or no consents are harder to monitor and it will be for members of the Group to make residents, builders and scaffolders aware of the presence of swifts and to act accordingly and within the provisions of the Wildlife and Countryside Act, which protect the birds and their nest sites during the breeding season. Regrettably this protection does not extend outside the breeding season and it is for the Group's members to persuade property owners that retaining swift nest sites is important.

Although slightly outside the boundaries of the Strettons, it is worth recording that nest sites were found on Cwm Head church and there is a strong possibility that swifts also nest on the churches at Cardington and Hope Bowdler. Churches are an increasingly important refuge for swifts and working with the local PCC, or other group responsible for the church, is important as they are often unaware of the birds and the steps needed to conserve these important colonies.

## **Objectives**

Swifts have been observed in and around Church Stretton for many years but although some residents are aware of some nesting sites that are, or have been, used there has been no formal recording of the location of nest sites or the number of birds. Anecdotally the numbers of birds in Church Stretton are stable although the numbers in the outlying villages All Stretton, Cardington and Little Stretton are believed to have declined in recent years.

Swifts are an amber listed species and it is thought that the loss of nest sites due to modern building methods and materials have played a key part in their decline. By recording known nest locations it is possible to monitor whether these sites continue to be used in subsequent years, whether more sites are used and, importantly, liaise with residents, builders and planners when works to improve properties is carried out. Surveying also indicates where it might be worthwhile installing artificial nest boxes to increase colony size – the birds are sociable and tend to nest within close range of each other.

The location of any nest sites recorded will be passed to Shropshire Council, Church Stretton Civic Society, RSPB swift survey and the county bird recorder.

## **Method**

Swifts return from Africa at the start of May and as the breeding season is short find their nest sites within a few days of arrival. From May to the start of August the breeding birds can be observed going to nest sites at sunset. Also, they can be seen returning to nest sites throughout the day to feed young from mid-June to early August. In good weather they may return several times an hour whereas in poor weather, when the search for food takes longer and involves trips further from the nest, less frequent visits to the nest are observed. A weekly Swift Watch meeting was held, weather permitting, from the end of May to the end of July. The group met around 30 – 45 minutes before sunset and a different area of town was visited each week. During the main feeding season members of the group also saw swifts at nest sites during the day time. Some surveyors focussed specifically on All Stretton and Little Stretton and some ad-hoc reports from residents and also those living further away were received.

## **Findings**

- The swifts arrived somewhat later than expected in 2014 – the first birds were not sighted until around the 6<sup>th</sup> of May which is a week later than usual.
- After a wet start to the season the weather then settled and for all of the main breeding season the weather was warm and neither excessively wet or windy.
- Swift Watch started at the end of May and quickly identified that the High Street in the area close to the Market Square is a real hot spot for swifts in the town. The birds were not going into nest sites until sunset – or even after – and on the Market Square they were active until well after 10pm even in early June. Perhaps the nearby street lights gave them sufficient light to return to nest sites later than would have been expected.
- Screaming parties of 12 – 14 swifts were regularly seen along the High Street close to the Market Square.

- Groups of up to 40 swifts were frequently seen around the Easthope Road area and it is thought that many of these were non-breeding birds as they appeared to drift off and up and not come to nest sites in the town.
- A couple of nest sites were found on the High Street at its junction with Lion Meadow.
- Another hot spot was found in Church Street with swifts seen going into many of the properties in this terrace of Victorian houses.
- A single nest site was also observed in Easthope Road and reports were received of swifts nesting in Lutwyche Avenue.
- There were reports of swifts east of the A49 near the nursing home and on a nearby house but there was no sign of any birds on the evening the Swift Watch group visited.
- Swifts were seen between Hazler and Ragleth Hills – presumably feeding.
- Although many swifts suddenly departed on the night of Saturday 26<sup>th</sup> July (this happened across the whole country) there were still reports across Shropshire of some birds still at nest sites. Presumably they were feeding late young and reports were received well into August of activity at some of the nest sites on the High Street. The latest recorded data a swift was seen in Church Stretton was 9<sup>th</sup> August.
- Late in the season, when the young are fairly well grown, droppings can frequently be seen under nest sites – and this is a useful confirmation of successful breeding. However droppings are not always present so lack of droppings does not mean no young. The left hand picture below shows droppings widely dispersed across the pavement under a nest. The right hand picture shows an abundance of droppings on a roof under a nest site.



## Thanks

To everyone who came out to look for swift nest sites and who sent information to the group. Special thanks to John Arnfield, Isabel Carter, Heather Hathaway, Tony Jones, Janet Longstaff and Gay Walker.

# Map showing general location of swift nest sites in Church Stretton

