



Swifts in the Strettons 2016



**Shropshire
Swift
Group**

Purpose & Objectives of the Project

The Swift (*Apus apus*) is amber-listed as a bird of conservation concern (due to falling population numbers) and it is thought that the loss of nest sites due to modern building methods and materials has played a key role in its decline. By recording known nest locations, it is possible to monitor whether these sites continue to be used in subsequent years or whether new sites are selected and, importantly, to liaise with residents, builders and planners when works to improve properties is carried out to ensure the preservation of nesting opportunities.

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.

Swifts are commonly observed in and around the Strettons but there was no formal recording of the locations of nest sites or the number of birds until 2014, when the first “Swifts in the Strettons” was inaugurated by the Stretton Area Community Wildlife Group, under the leadership of Peta Sams. The observations of 2015 and 2016 seek to build on and extend the results of this study. They used the same methodology, involving weekly surveys on foot of appropriate areas and of those for which reports had been received by members of the public.

The location of the nest sites recorded will be passed to Shropshire Council, Church Stretton Civic Society, RSPB swift survey and the county bird recorder for use when proposals for maintenance or modification of buildings occupied by Swifts are filed with planning authorities and to establish the presence of Swift populations in the county.

Results: General Observations of Swifts in the Strettons

The earliest arrivals of the 2016 breeding season were observed in early May, with the first observation being the 3rd of that month, one day earlier than last year. Additional birds arrived during the following week and large groups were common by mid-month.

Counted group sizes reported range from singletons to more than 20 with some larger groups too numerous to count accurately.

“Screaming parties” were reported during June and July throughout the daylight (and twilight) hours. Most of these were close to the Market Square and Church Street. Swift flight activity (even at low levels) was apparently unaffected by the presence of stalls and large numbers of people in the former location on Thursdays (market day).

A total of 40 nest sites was confirmed (i.e. birds were observed entering a consistent location on a building two or more times), which is 18 more than in 2015 and 21 more than in 2014.

The last date of observation of a Swift was 8th August.

Results: Swift Nest Site Locations

In the following account, the term “site” is used for a specific location on a building at which Swift activity was observed. Some buildings possessed multiple sites.

Within Church Stretton and All Stretton, 10 sites were found in which nesting occurred in all three years of the survey so far, 14 at which nesting occurred in 2016 and one other year and 16 in which evidence of breeding is available for only 2016.

In addition, five more were unconfirmed (i.e. only one Swift visit was observed in 2016).

There were 14 sites at which confirmed or unconfirmed nesting was observed in previous years but which were not used in 2016.

There are several conclusions that can be drawn from the confirmed site data.

- Stretton’s Swifts exhibit nest site fidelity. There was only one building with confirmed use in 2015 for which there were no records for 2016. On buildings to which Swifts returned, exact locations exhibited some variation between years.
- Of the four buildings (nine sites) that were used in 2016 but not in 2015, three were in areas of newer (twentieth century) housing rather than in the older town core. Probably, this is due in part to the fact that this area was inadequately surveyed in prior years, especially given that many of the sites apparently have a long history of Swift nesting (according to residents’ observations). No sites were found in post-World War II buildings.
- Evidence of *successful* breeding was as follows:
 - droppings on a lower roof or pavement below nest (eight sites)
 - noise of chicks from within the roof space (five sites)
 - a dead chick found beneath the nest (one site)
 - a Swift egg found beneath a nest, cracked in a manner that suggests emergence of a chick rather than predation (one site).

Two of the sites were in nest boxes but show somewhat perplexing evidence of nesting. The boxes were erected beneath the eaves of a residence on Shrewsbury Road (see Figure 1) on 7th May, interest was shown in them on 24th May and they were occupied by 28th May, perhaps assisted by the use of recorded Swift calls at the location. While birds were observed entering and leaving both boxes, and the egg alluded to above was found, there is no evidence that young were fledged from this site. Perhaps the birds that took possession of these sites were inexperienced and failed in their attempt to raise families (which may



Figure 1. Swift nest boxes at a residence on Shrewsbury Road

bode well for next year should they return to the same site.)

There is unconfirmed (but highly probable) evidence of multiple nesting sites in a farmyard site in Little Stretton. Large numbers of birds are observed to congregate at this location prior to dusk (often mixed in with Swallows and House Martins). The Swifts were observed to swoop downwards towards various buildings in the farmyard about 21:15 and not to reappear, suggesting movement to a roosting site. However, access to this site to confirm roosting in late evening was not possible. It seems likely that there may be 5-10 additional nesting locations here, based on the numbers of birds observed flying low over the farmyard that apparently landed at nest sites at dusk.

Nest aspect shows a bias towards the easterly direction: where the nest cavity entrance is apparent, 54% face an easterly direction (see Table 1).

Aspect of nest	Confirmed Site
N	2
NNE	1
NE	2
ENE	1
E	21
ESE	2
S	5
SW	3
WNW	2

Table 1: Nest Aspect for Confirmed Nest Sites (where known)

Located nest sites show a clustered distribution. The 40 confirmed nest sites in Church Stretton are found in only 16 buildings with 22 addresses. Of the buildings with nest sites, all but five are within 200 m of St Laurence’s Church and all but one are within 500m.

All Stretton has a single confirmed building location with confirmed nesting.

Concluding Remarks

There is little reason to believe that the Strettons area Swift population or nest total has changed significantly since 2014. While the number of nest sites found each year has increased, this increase may be attributed to newly discovered sites in areas of Church Stretton with twentieth century housing stock. These areas were not surveyed as intensively in earlier years. Accordingly, it is concluded that the breeding status of Swifts probably has remained unchanged in the Strettons in the three year period since the first “Swifts in the Strettons” survey.

Despite the new nests alluded to above, the core breeding area remains in the older building stock in the area of the Market Square, Church Street and Cunnery Road. Evidence for all of these areas suggests that, while Swifts are faithful to particular *buildings*, they do not always re-use the precise *sites* employed in previous breeding seasons. Whether this represents flexibility on the part of an individual returning adult or whether location shifts denote the returning offspring of birds raised in those buildings must remain a source of speculation.

Acknowledgements

This survey would not have been possible without the efforts of those SACWG members who participated in evening survey walks and contributed casual observations (Steve Baker, Julie Cowley, Brenda Crosby, Nicky Halliburton, Tony Jones, Janet Longstaff, Graham Wenman and Sandra & Peter Whitlock and to the residents of the Strettons who talked to us about the Swifts with which they shared their houses.

Confidentiality

This version of the “Swifts in the Strettons” results for the SACWG Annual Report has been edited to remove all reference to specific addresses and buildings. A fuller version with such information retained is available for those with a “need to know” (e.g. planning bodies). To request this report, please contact John Arnfield (*arnfield.2@osu.edu* or 01694 724 170).

John Arnfield

1st January 2017