



Swifts in the Strettons 2015



Purpose & Objectives of the Project

The Swift (*Apus apus*) is an amber-listed 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 their 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 survey of 2015 sought to build on and extend the results of this study. It 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 general 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 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 first arrival of the 2015 breeding season was observed on 4th May, with many other arrivals during the following week. By the end of the month, groups of 10 birds were not uncommon. Group sizes reported range from singletons to 30, with those in excess of 10 often indicated to be flying high. The size distribution of group size, based on 120 records, is shown in Table 1.

Records of screaming parties occurred between the last week of May and the first week of August and involved between 4 and 20 birds, mostly in the vicinity of the Market Square and Church Street.

Size Range	Percentage of Groups
≤ 4	55%
> 4, ≤ 8	28%
> 8, ≤ 12	8%
> 12, ≤ 16	3%
> 16, ≤ 20	5%
> 20	2%
Mean group size: 5.2 birds	

Table 1: Size ranges of Swift groups

A total of 22 nest sites was confirmed (i.e. birds were observed entering a consistent location on a building two or more times), which is three more than in 2014. These were observed on 14 buildings. In addition, around 10 more were unconfirmed (i.e. only one visit was observed). Some combination of the following evidence of young present in the nest was obtained for seven sites:

- Young birds heard by house occupants in roof space.
- Vocal young heard by observer, especially when an adult bird arrived with food.
- Young bird found on ground beneath nest.
- Droppings noted on ground beneath nest site.

The chick found on the ground was taken to Cuan Wildlife Rescue, Much Wenlock, on 6th August but later died. It was found to be about one week from fledging but was diagnosed with a tumour in its throat and Cuan speculate that it may have been ejected from the nest by a parent.

The last observed visit to a nest occurred on 24th August. This was also the latest date any Swift was recorded in the Strettons during 2015.

Miscellaneous facts about the 2015 (and prior years) results include the following.

- Swifts in Little Stretton were observed to fly in mixed flocks with hirundines (Swallow and House Martin) until about 21:15, when they separated prior to roosting.
- The occupant of one building in the centre of Church Stretton confirmed a 29-year occupancy by Swifts.
- One market square site may have been an entrance location for more than one nest. At several times during the nesting season, more than two adult birds were observed to enter, including at roosting time (when they did not emerge). Also, the calls of young birds were extremely loud at street level, suggesting large numbers of chicks.
- Swift flight activity (even at low levels) was unaffected by the presence of the Church Stretton market on Thursdays.

Results: Swift Nest Site Locations

The following is a summary of the numbers of confirmed Swift nesting sites in the two years of the survey.

- 12 (37%) sites had nests in 2015 but not 2014
- 10 (32%) sites had nests in both years
- 10 (32%) sites had nests in 2014 but not 2015

In addition, 10 sites had unconfirmed nests in 2015

There are a number of conclusions that can be drawn from the confirmed sites information.

- (a) Stretton's Swifts exhibit nest site fidelity. There was only one building used in 2014 for which there were no records for 2015. On re-used buildings, exact locations varied slightly between years, suggesting that Swifts may accept some variation in exact nest sites as long as the general characteristics of the site's environs remains a constant. Of course, there is no evidence that close nest sites are necessarily used by the same pair between years.
- (b) Of the six buildings that were used in 2015 but not in 2014, five were in areas of newer (twentieth century) housing rather than in the town core. In all probability, this is due in part to the fact that this area was inadequately surveyed in 2014, 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.

There is extensive unconfirmed evidence of multiple nesting sites in Little Stretton. However, access to the property to confirm roosting 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 location that apparently landed at nest sites at dusk.

Aspect of nest	Confirmed Sites	Unconfirmed Sites
N	2	1
NNE	1	0
NE	1	0
ENE	1	0
E	9	3
SE	0	1
S	3	0
SW	3	0
WNW	2	2
NW	0	1

Table 2: Distribution of nest aspect for all nest sites

Nest aspect shows a bias towards the easterly direction: some 41% of the 22 confirmed nests exhibit this tendency (see Table 2).

Concluding Remarks

There is little reason to believe that the Strettons area Swift population or nest total has changed significantly since 2014. While more confirmed nests (3 more) were found, this increase may be attributed to newly discovered sites in areas of Church Stretton with twentieth century housing (on the east side of town). These areas were not surveyed as intensively in 2014. In addition, residents suggest these are long-standing nesting sites. Accordingly, it is concluded that the breeding status of Swifts has remained unchanged in the Strettons in the one-year period since the last “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.

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