

# Swifts in Plumpton – a waiting game



The swift looks a bit like a swallow, but is a little larger, is all black with a slightly forked tail and long narrow curved wings, and it charges around at high speed, often in groups. There was a couple of swifts flying around ‘near’ All Saint’s Church last week. This was the first indication I have had that they might be showing interest in returning to breed in the church, following their disappearance from there in the early 1980s. In about 1990, we put a few specially made boxes in the tower, but they were not very suitably designed for the site and were never used.

Experience has moved on since then, especially with swifts in church towers and so, in 2009, we put some new boxes there; in fact behind the louvres that you see from the outside of the church tower are 30 nest chambers for swifts. With few swifts in the area (until relatively recently there were a few pairs in the Church at East Chiltington, but they have gone and now the nearest focus is Lewes) we knew that we would have to be patient. Then a new aid came along in the form of a means of playing swifts calls from the nest sites to encourage passing birds to investigate and this has resulted in the establishment of many new colonies in churches and houses. We have been running a call system over the last three years for the short period that the swifts are in the country (from May until the beginning of August). Thus, at certain time of day, you may be able to hear the sounds of swifts coming from the church tower.

Swifts really are masters of the air: between leaving their nest sites one year and returning from Africa the next year they will be in the air the whole time; indeed when the young first leave the nest it may be two years before they ever land again. Much of this time they are chasing insect food, including a lot of aphids and other small flying insects, and taking ‘cat-naps’ in the air. In my misspent youth we ringed c.7500 swifts at my local sewage farm with birds recovered down through western Europe and North Africa as far as the Congo. Our birds were nearly all breeding adults; we only caught about 10 newly fledged juveniles, which are believed to depart the moment they leave the nest in late July or early August. Some of them return in the next summer. Again we didn’t catch

many (c.70) but these birds arrive from late June and investigate nest sites although they won't breed until at least the following year. They check the occupancy of potential nesting places by flying past screaming and banging on the outside of the nest site with their wings. Probably it is mainly these birds that will investigate and colonise new sites. And they have time, these are long-lived birds with a number of the birds we retrapped being 16 years old.

So, we hope that these fascinating birds will re-establish in the village; we may also try to get them back to the church at East Chiltington. However, as said above, we may have to be patient – even where swifts do start to colonise, it can take a long time to build up numbers. Nevertheless, it is said that well over 50% of the projects to establish colonies (and that includes some pretty wild ideas) have been successful – eventually.

Swift is a declining species, at present included in the Amber list of threatened species in the UK but also of considerable concern throughout Europe. Apart from problems with the insect food supply, these birds almost exclusively breed in buildings, where they may be excluded by renovation or where suitable nest sites are not available in modern housing. But there are huge co-ordinated efforts throughout Europe to help, and some extremely inventive systems. A special Swift Tower was constructed last year at Berwick. Earlier this year Theresa May opened the first ever 'swift hotel' at a Premier Inn in Maidenhead. You can see more about these initiatives on sites such as <http://actionforswifts.blogspot.co.uk/> and <http://www.swift-conservation.org/>. The Sussex Ornithological Society has its own 'Swift Champion' (see [www.sos.org.uk/swifts/index.php](http://www.sos.org.uk/swifts/index.php)).

And please let me know if you see any showing interest in the church tower.

*Tony Hutson*