

CHERWELL SWIFTS CONSERVATION PROJECT

ANNUAL REPORT 2016



(Photos: Roger Wyatt)

Introduction

Reports like this tend to emphasise positive outcomes and achievements, and this is no exception. However, I should start by saying that overall the news about Swifts is far from rosy. Numbers continue to decline, and the causes remain the same - fewer insects, increasingly unpredictable weather patterns and loss of habitat. In this area last summer many young Swifts fledged prematurely almost certainly due to lack of food. Sadly most of the ones that were found did not survive long enough to reach Gillian Westray's place for rehabilitation.

All this makes it additionally important to do what we can. We can still encourage people to look out for their local Swifts and look after the places where they already nest. We must continue to advocate that Swift bricks are included in new developments. We should still be promoting the use of nest boxes.

The 2016 Season in Cherwell and North Oxfordshire

Wellington Square and the University



David Lack mentioned Swifts nesting in **Oxford's Wellington Square** in the 1940's. They still nest there under the eaves on the right of the gable. This year they would have been deprived of access to that nest place by maintenance work, but Jocelyne Hughes spoke to the University building surveyors who agreed to leave the nesting area free of scaffolding during the breeding season (see photo). The plan worked. The birds nested as usual and the maintenance work was done after the young Swifts had fledged.

New nest places



3 of the 6 boxes Reg and Bill installed in the tower at **St Mary's Bodicote**, near Banbury were occupied by prospecting birds. This is a church first for us. We believe much the same happened at **Stanton St John** though the evidence there was less obvious.



Tim Huckvale built nest boxes into his home extension in **Sibford Ferris** (photo left) in the winter of 2015 and had Swifts roosting during the summer. Swifts also showed interest in the bricks Alan Peck has in his new house in Chesterton.

Cherwell Council has incorporated about 30 bricks in 8 small developments in **Banbury** and **Bicester** including these (Bicester below and Banbury right).





Swift numbers at **Broughton Castle** appeared to be steady or slightly higher than in recent years - about 7 pairs. You may be able to spot 22 birds here.

(Photo: Martin Fiennes)

Combe

Richard Woodward had 16 nesting pairs at his home, and another 4 pairs roosting. This number has increased each year since the first pair arrived in 2000. 33 young birds fledged this year – only a few short of the number from the Oxford Museum of Natural History.

A very unusual record

I heard of a pair of Swifts nesting in a tree in the north of the county. We visited the site in a private garden and saw the Swifts go into the nest hole, in a cavity in the trunk of an ash tree. We cannot say for certain that the young birds fledged safely because the owners were away when this should have happened, but next summer if the Swifts can compete successfully with the local Starlings we hope to be able to confirm successful breeding.

Churches in the diocese

The Oxford Diocese has agreed to be Swift-friendly regarding building repairs at churches where Swifts nest and to look favourably at requests to install Swift boxes in church towers. So this year we made a big effort to find as many churches as we could with nesting Swifts. We reached a total of 31. This was fewer than I had hoped and I am sure there are more to be found. Thanks to Sue Hetherington and Jan Stannard for their help gathering information in Bucks and Berks respectively.

Sue received an interesting report from **Wingrave** in Bucks, where the late David Snow, eminent ornithologist and writer (on Blackbirds and Birds and Berries for instance), put nest boxes in the church tower over 20 years ago. They have been regularly used since with 5 pairs nesting in 2016.

This year we installed boxes at **St Mary's Kidlington**, and will have done the same at **St Laurence Milcombe** before next summer. We are working closely with Father Andrew Foster whilst further major repair work is carried out at **St Joseph's Catholic Church in Carterton** (a very important Swift nest site).

Events



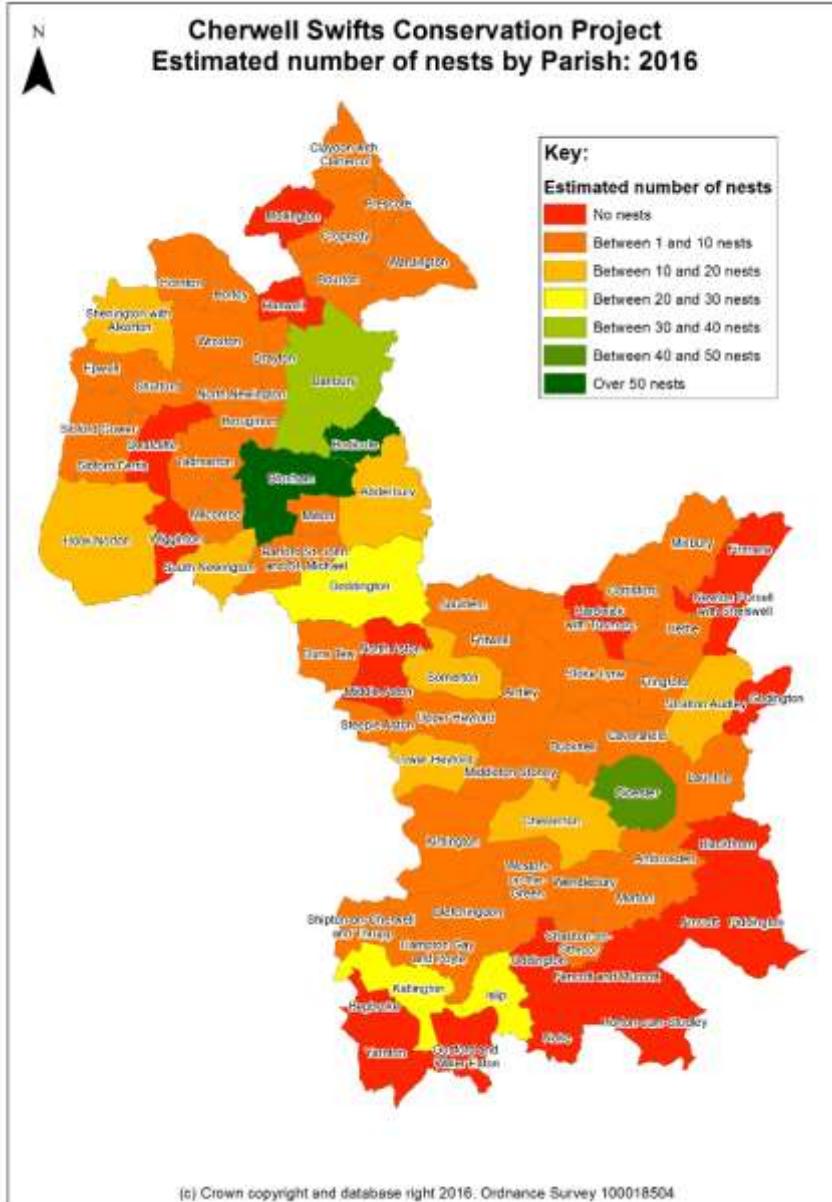
As usual we organised walks, talks and displays. We were part of BBOWT's Wildlife Garden at the 4-day Countryfile Live event at Blenheim. Thanks to Peta Sams for the loan of her 'Andy Jarrett' Swift weathervane, which was much admired and also made a useful marker for our little shed; also to Joel Walker for bringing her sculptures, and to **Bloxham** Swift volunteers for the wonderful Swift mobile made specially for the event. It was fun. We made new contacts and appreciated the great support from the BBOWT team.

Oxford Swift City

This year the RSPB obtained funding for its Oxford Swift City project. The project will start in earnest in 2017 and run for 2 years. I am delighted to be one of the individual project partners along with Jocelyne Hughes with whom I have collaborated on various talks and walks in Oxford, and Andrew Lack. The other project partners are BBOWT, the Museum of Natural History, the City Council, Oxford University, the Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre and ERM (Environmental Resources Management).

Thanks

My thanks once more to all who have monitored and reported on nest sites, sent in records, raised alerts about building work and about opportunities for installing bricks and boxes or made space for Swifts in their own homes; to those who have organised walks and meetings and helped at events; to TVERC for checking the records so carefully and submitting them to the Council; and to all at the Cherwell DC who have made good use of the data to help Swifts ; to the ever-willing team of nest box installers; to Daniel Messer for Swift mapping; to the Swift ambulance volunteers and Gillian Westray for another summer of dedicated caring; and to Roger Wyatt for the amazing photos of Oxfordshire Swifts at the top of this report .



Cherwell Swifts Map

This map shows our estimate of the number of nest sites in the district by parish.

Notice the number of 'Red' parishes indicating no nesting Swifts, and that many others have only a few remaining pairs.

Note also that the parishes with the highest number of pairs, Bloxham and Bodicote, have been the most thoroughly surveyed.

I believe the figures are pretty accurate. Certainly none are over estimated.

And remember that even a parish 'extinction' need not be permanent for anyone

willing to have a try and to persevere. See for instance -

<http://actionforswifts.blogspot.co.uk/2015/08/swifts-get-established-in-dry-drayton.html>

Chris Mason
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