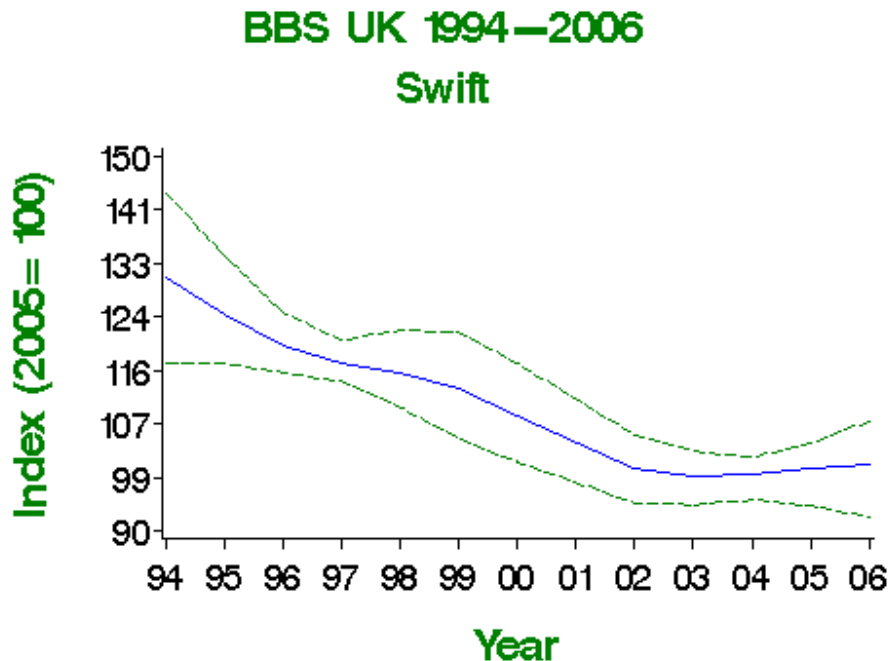


## SWIFT CONSERVATION IN CHERWELL DISTRICT REPORT for 2009

### The Present Status of Swifts in Britain

According to recent data from the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO), Swift numbers have declined by 41% since 1994 (see *Figure 1 below*). Swifts are now on the amber list of Birds of Conservation Concern.



*Figure 1. The BTO Breeding Birds Survey shows the sharp decline in the number of Swifts breeding in the UK during the period 1994 – 2006.*

There are probably several reasons why Swift numbers have declined so much and so quickly, but one of these is certainly loss of nesting sites.

### The Project with the Cherwell District Council

The aim of the project is to record the places where Swifts nest in the District. These data are collated by the Thames Valley Environmental Records Centre and incorporated into a GIS layer. The information is then available to the Council ecologist and local planners. Then if a planning application is made which affects one of these sites, the Council can make enquiries, and request that the nesting place is left unaltered or that at least alternative nearby provision is made. More details of the project are available on the Cherwell District Council website (search under Swifts on the Environment and Planning pages).

The records are also being sent to the RSPB for inclusion in its own database. The RSPB will use the information to encourage more sensitive development and renovation of buildings.

Here are the definitions of the terms used in the attached spreadsheet of records: **Known sites** are those where the building in which Swifts nest as been identified.

**Vicinity sites** are those where we know fairly precisely where Swifts are nesting but do not know the exact site.

**Village sites** are those where Swifts are present and have been recorded screaming or displaying but where we do not have precise information about the location of nests.

### **The 2009 Season**

From the information I have received, I think Swifts may have had a rather more successful year in 2009 than in the previous two years. Flocks of 100 or more were noted in both Bicester and Banbury on a several fine summer evenings, and 50 or so reported from Bloxham and Kidlington and decent numbers from a number of other villages.

This is my second year of information gathering and I have already come across several people who are doing wonderful things to care for Swifts. Some Swift watchers in the area have been welcoming Swifts to the same sites at or near where they live for 40 years or more. Every year they eagerly await their return and ensure they are not disturbed. Other people are taking a lot of trouble to protect the birds we have and add to their numbers. Here are a few stories I'd like to pass on.

1. Carl Smith has been watching the Swifts in Kidlington for years. He has noticed how many nest sites have been lost due to building alterations. This year he has recorded the Swift nest sites in one of the former council housing areas, and has now started to campaign to make sure that the remaining ones are kept safe. He is also hoping that some of the sites which used to be used are restored, and to put up nest boxes to provide more sites. Council homes built around the 1950s is often important Swift habitat and I hope we can collect information from other towns and villages to protect Swifts that are still using them.
2. Mike Patching got the consent of the Horley Parochial Church Council to instal nest boxes for Swifts in the louvred windows of the church tower. He has now made and put up the boxes himself. Swifts are still present in the village in reasonable numbers and can regularly be seen around the lovely church, so there must be a good chance that this initiative will be rewarded.

3. Swifts took up residence in a Starling's nest hole in the wall of the Woodward's house in Combe (admittedly just outside Cherwell District) in 2000, immediately after a pair of Starlings had left. Now nine summers later Richard has 8 breeding pairs of Swifts with a ninth pair prospecting. He has done this by opening up small new spaces in the wall of his home. What's more he knows all the places where Swifts nest in Combe and there is now a small network of Swift information gathering and exchange in the village. Local knowledge and interest-raising like this must be the best way to ensure that Swifts are valued and protected.
4. In Kirtlington where I live Chris and Ruth Powles had some major works done on their old house early in 2007. They included 6 small holes (made to measure for Swifts) in the west-facing wall. Late that summer Swifts – which already nested nearby - prospected the holes. In 2008 they were deterred by Starlings, but this year they have nested in 3 of the 6 holes and prospected others, Chris having blocked up the entrances until the Swifts returned in May. Swifts have continued to occupy 2 other nearby sites in the village, so the new holes have more than doubled the number of Swifts nesting in this part of the village in one season. Chris is hoping to build in some additional (Starling-proof) Swift nest holes this winter, and we also plan to put up some boxes on a couple of nearby homes.

And of course as I expect you know by now...

5. Thanks to the initiative and persistence of Sue Marchand, the Cherwell Council installed Swift bricks in the new Sports Centre in Banbury. We hope these will attract Swifts in the years to come and that this type of project can be repeated by the Council and copied by others elsewhere too.

The RSPB has provided good publicity for this story in its periodical Conservation Planning (Autumn 2009 issue), as has the local press.

There are plenty of other examples of what is being done and what can be done. Many thanks to all of you for your help and interest.

#### *Acknowledgments*

*1. This project would not have come about without the support and enthusiasm of Sue Marchand the Biodiversity and Countryside Officer at the Cherwell District Council*

*My thanks also to the following:*

*2. Edward Mayer for his inspirational talk in Kirtlington in April and for always being so ready with advice and help. Whatever your question about Swifts, the Swift Conservation website ([www.swiftconservation.org](http://www.swiftconservation.org)), which Edward has set up, is the best place to start.*

*3. Dick Newell for responding promptly to questions especially about Swifts in church buildings, and for offering to come and visit if needed.*

*4. Gavin Bird (TVERC) for mapping all the data.*

*5. Kevin Ferriday for creating the fantastic spreadsheet which makes the information more user-friendly and will also making recording the data so much simpler next year..*

*To all of you who have contributed records.*

***Finally a reminder it is illegal for anyone to disturb a nest site in use. So building or repair work which poses such a threat can be stopped. I know you are all aware of this, but it still happens.***

Chris Mason  
November 2009