

Pitlochry Community Swift Project 2017 & 2018

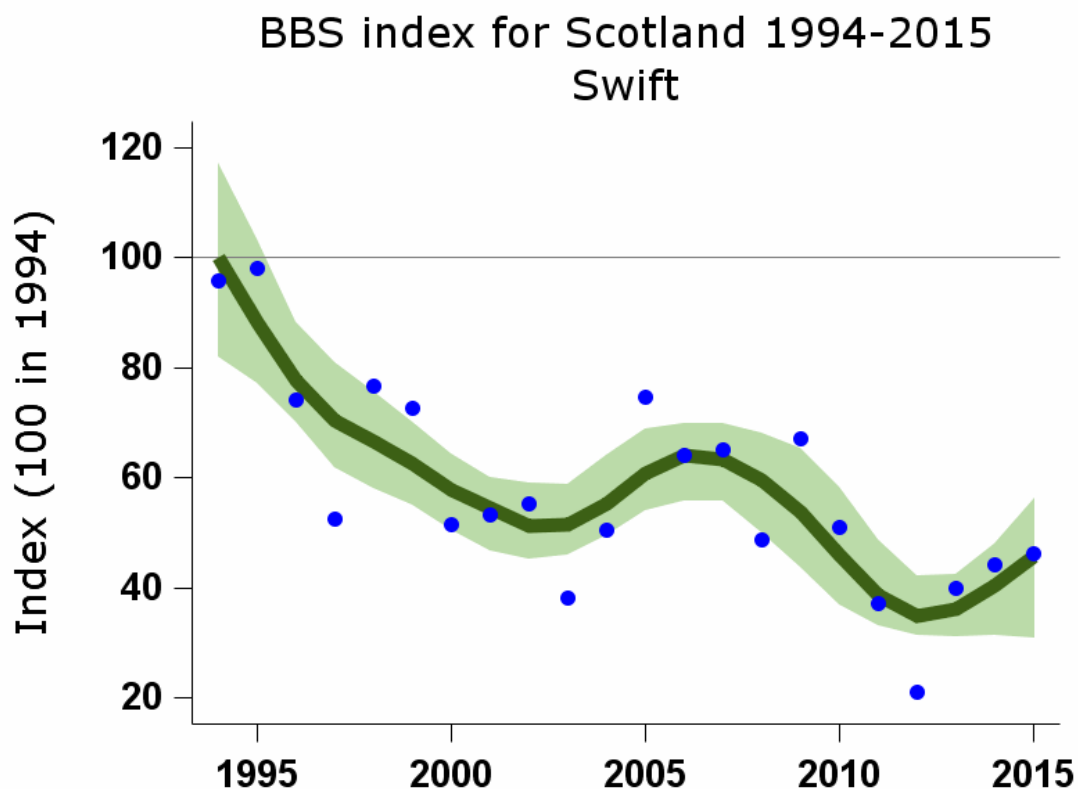


Swifts in Scotland.

The Common swift (*Apus apus*) is a summer visitor to Scotland, arriving in early May and leaving in early August for its wintering areas in southern and central Africa. They are superbly adapted aerial birds which live their entire life on the wing, landing only to breed. Originally using cliffs, crags and occasional trees for breeding, they have adapted well to using man-made buildings.

Surveys carried out by the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO) show that there has been a decline of over 60% in the population of swifts in Scotland between 1995 and 2013 (Breeding Bird Survey Report for 2014). In 2009 this led to swifts receiving an Amber listing, showing that they are now a UK Species of Conservation Concern. They are also included in the Scottish Government's Biodiversity List of Priority Species.

Figure 1 – Graph showing the Breeding Bird Survey index for the Swift in Scotland.



A major contribution to the decline in population is the ever-increasing loss of nesting sites. Swifts are predominately associated with older buildings where they use the gaps under eaves, gaps in pointing and cracks in stonework to nest. As these buildings are renovated, these gaps and cracks are filled in, resulting in the loss of nest sites. As swifts return to the same site year after year, it is increasingly difficult for them to find a new nest site in which to breed. It is likely that one of the limiting factors in the size of swift populations is the availability of nest sites.

Swifts will also nest in newer buildings where there are suitable gaps and spaces. However, modern building practices tend to exclude swifts from their traditional sites by using materials which seal all gaps and cover ventilation spaces. Wire mesh plates or grids are now used to cover ventilation gaps, and new building materials and techniques do not offer alternative possibilities.

Swifts are declining in number as we exclude them from renovated buildings. This project has brought together the local community in proactively helping to safeguard the existing population of swifts in Pitlochry.

Swifts in Pitlochry.

Perthshire Wildlife was commissioned by the Tayside Biodiversity Partnership to run the Pitlochry Swift Conservation Project. The objective of the project was to raise awareness of local swifts with the local community – involving all ages and abilities in taking care of their special birds and making Pitlochry a safe and welcoming town for them. The project aims were as follows:

- Carry out guided walks to raise awareness of swifts and encourage swift recording;
- Work with local schools to raise awareness of swifts, encourage swift recording and erect a swift box on each school;
- Initiate a Swift Twinning Project with local and African schools;
- Map existing swift nest sites and screaming party locations with Dots on Maps sessions;
- Work with local businesses and householders to find good locations for swift nestboxes;
- Donate swift nestboxes to businesses and householders to erect the boxes on their properties;
- Disseminate information across Tayside, Scotland, the UK and to the international swift community.

Events:

The following table details activities that took place between the start of the project in July 2017 and its completion in June 2018.

Table 1 – Pitlochry Swift Conservation Project activities 7/17 – 6/18.

Date	Activity (numbers attending)
July 2017	Press release and social media posts to raise awareness of project and advertise upcoming guided walk.
5 th July 2017	Guided walk around Pitlochry (8).
December 2017	Contact with Logierait, Pitlochry and Blair Atholl schools.
January 2018	Tayside Swifts joined Roots & Shoots organisation to facilitate school twinning. Liaison with Swifts without

	Frontiers regarding twinning and communications with schools in Tanzania, Uganda and South Africa.
12 th January 2018	Talk to Logierait Primary (15) and Blair Atholl Primary (31).
20 th January 2018	Cairngorms National Park Authority Volunteer's Day, Killiecrankie. The opportunity to publicise the project to a wider audience (25).
February 2018	Press release and social media posts to raise awareness of project and advertise upcoming event.
17 th February 2018	Pitlochry's Super Swifts events at Pitlochry library (8) – a morning of film, art, storytelling, mapping & a quiz. Participants produced artwork which will be the Scottish representation at an international Welcome Swifts festival in Israel in April 2018 (as part of the International Swift Conference).
January & February 2018	Contact with various organisations & members of the public to arrange permission for swift nestbox erection. This included Culture Perth & Kinross, Scotrail, the local Scottish Wildlife Trust group and the John Muir Trust.
18 th April 2018	Day hire of a cherrypicker to erect nestboxes.
2 nd June 2018	Dots on Maps event at Pitlochry Library (18).
6 th June 2018	Guided walk for Logierait primary school (15).
7 th June 2018	Guided walk for Blair Atholl primary school (30).
16 th June 2018	Guided walk in Pitlochry - part of the first ever National Swift Awareness Week (1).
22 nd June 2018	Guided walk in Blair Atholl - part of the first ever National Swift Awareness Week (2).

Photo 1: Artwork produced by Pitlochry's Super Swifts event attendees © D. Muir.



Guided walks:

The first guided walk of the project was carried out on July 5th, from 8.30pm, attended by eight people. Press releases had been issued to The Courier and the Perthshire Advertiser to advertise the event, as well as promotion on the Perthshire Wildlife and Tayside Swifts Facebook & Twitter sites.

A number of swifts were seen on the walk. Swallows and house martins, along with house martin nests, were also observed, and the differences between the species pointed out.

Everyone on the guided walk took away a Swift Survey Form and were shown how to carry out a swift survey. This should result in more nest site records for Pitlochry and Perthshire.

Further guided walks were carried out in Pitlochry and Blair Atholl as part of the first ever National Swift Awareness Week in June 2018. Due to wet weather there was only one attendee at the Pitlochry walk and few swifts were spotted. However, on leaving Pitlochry, around 30 swifts were spotted feeding over the River Tummel just underneath the A9 road bridge which is an important sighting. Two people attended the walk in Blair Atholl the following week, where new nest sites were discovered on the Tilt Hotel, which is earmarked for renovation. A screaming party of twenty individuals was also recorded.

School visits:

Logierait and Blair Atholl Primary Schools were both visited on January 12th, with all the pupils from each school receiving a talk about swift ecology, why the birds are in trouble and what we can all do to help. The schools were given details about which countries they may be able to twin with – Uganda, Tanzania and South Africa – and were given the choice of which school/ country they would prefer. A copy of 'Screamer the Swift' – a book detailing the life of a young swift – was given to each school, as well as a copy for their twinning school. The twinning process has since been started with two schools in Tanzania but it is a slow process as the co-ordinator in Africa is very busy and also un-paid for this work. Lack of facilities at the African schools will also be a factor.

Both schools had a swift nest box erected in April, in time for the swifts' return. A swift call CD was given to the schools in June to increase the chances of the boxes being found by swifts. The nestbox at Logierait primary contains a camera and House sparrows can be seen sitting on a nest.

Both schools had a guided walk in their village in June, to look for the birds and their nest sites, and to demonstrate how simple the Town Swift Survey is. Surprisingly, the pupils at Logierait were treated to a pair of swifts flying around the school, going into a previously unknown nest site on the building and flying only a few centimetres over the children's heads! The Blair Atholl pupils had excellent sightings of swifts screaming around the Tilt Hotel, where there are a number of nests.

Photo 2: Logierait primary school pupils discovering a swift nest site on their school © D. Muir.

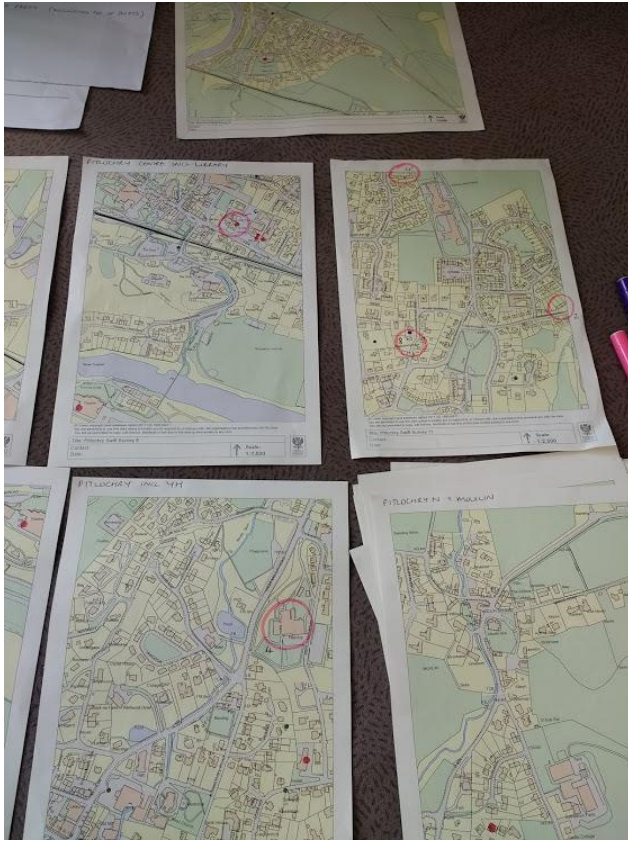


Pitlochry Library Super Swifts & Dots on Maps events:

The Super Swifts event took place on February 17th, with seven attendees, from primary school children to retirees. A number of attendees had seen swifts in screaming parties in the town, which was helpful for the Dots on Maps exercise, and were keen to take part in the survey in the summer. Participants watched a short film about swifts called Silent Spring, produced swift artwork, participated in a swift quiz and a storytelling session.

The Dots on Maps session took place on the second of June, with a surprising number of people attending to report where they had seen swifts in screaming parties, helping to focus survey efforts on these areas in the future.

Photo 3: Dots on Maps records of screaming parties and nest sites © D. Muir.



Nestbox erection:

Nestboxes were erected with a cherrypicker hired from Tayside Contracts at the following locations: John Muir office, Pitlochry; Logierait primary school; Blair Atholl primary school; Balhousie Care Home, Pitlochry; Pitlochry Library; The Atholl Centre, Pitlochry; VisitScotland Office, Pitlochry; the Baptist Church, Pitlochry; SYHA hostel, Pitlochry; Pitlochry Dam Visitor Centre plus homes in Blair Atholl, Moulin and Pitlochry.

Owners and occupiers were encouraged to play the swift call CD and let Tayside Swifts know when birds moved in to the boxes.

Conclusion:

The Pitlochry Swift Conservation Swift Project has achieved a lot in a short period of time. It has reached a good number and range of people. We are starting to have a better idea of where swifts gather in screaming parties and nest in the towns and villages of the Pitlochry area. The project has helped to raise awareness of the dangers that swifts face and will hopefully result in more sightings by the end of the summer. This information, working alongside the local authority, will be used to help conserve swift nests and safeguard Pitlochry's swifts.

Acknowledgements:

Thanks to Andie Millar's Trust for funding, Pitlochry Library staff, Lorna Barr, Head teacher and Martine Swiftlady from Swifts without Frontiers for their help.

Report dated 1/7/18.



Carried out by Danièle Muir, Perthshire Wildlife, The Old Post Office, Murthly, Perthshire.
On behalf of Tayside Swifts and the Tayside Biodiversity Partnership.