

Let's Go Outside WEEKEND

Swift action needed to save wildlife in the sky

Felicity Martin

FEW sounds are more reminiscent of summer than a pack of swifts screaming around the houses on a balmy evening. Unfortunately, it is a sound that is becoming less common in many places. The swift population in Scotland has declined by 62 per cent in the past decade and there is a danger that we could lose these masters of the air altogether. Last month, I joined a Swift Walk in Auchtermuir to learn more about these fascinating birds and what can be done to help them.

The lunchtime session was organised by Catherine Lloyd, the Tayside Biodiversity Officer, and Daniele Muir, a Perth and Kinross Council Ranger. We were also joined by Claire Danieles, of the project Concern for Swifts, which is promoting conservation of Apus spp., the Common Swift. It soon became apparent what extraordinary birds these are. They nest, drink, mate and even sleep on the wing. Once the young fledge and leave the nest they may keep flying for four years before they themselves are mature enough to breed. Whole colonies can be lost when a

neglected building is 'improved'. Action is needed now to help ensure the future survival of our swift populations. There are two main ways to play a part. One is to participate in surveying where swifts are nesting in our towns and villages, so that a map can be built up of 'hotspots'. The second is to make sure that any building work takes account of swifts - maintaining access to the cavities they nest in or adding special nest boxes for them.

Swifts are only with us from about May to August. The rest of the year is spent in the south of Africa, reached by a long migration during which they can fly so high in the sky as to be invisible from the ground. We don't really know what threats swifts face when they are abroad during the autumn and winter, but what is clear is that part of their diet is down to loss of nesting sites here. The way we renovate and construct buildings these days often excludes swifts from old and new nest sites. Whole colonies can be lost when a



BUILT FOR SPEED: The characteristic swift profile in the Scottish skyline.

Birds of a feather

SWIFTS are sooty-brown and unmarked apart from an inconspicuous white patch under their chin. When flying against a summer sky, they tend to look black. They are most easily confused with swallows, which are white underneath with long tail streamers, or house martins, which are white underneath with a white vent. What marks swifts out is their sheer speed and manoeuvrability, which enables them to twist and turn in flight. They often glide on their long, scythe-like wings and their wing beats are soft, quite dissimilar to the more 'buttery' house martin. Their food is flying insects and airborne spiders, which they gather in a circle just at the back of their mouth. They then swallow this or take it to the nest to feed their young. The non-breeding young return with the colony and can often be seen prospecting for a future nest site by repeatedly flying up at the eaves of a building. Swifts normally lay two to three eggs, which they start incubating immediately. As with most birds, this is a survival strategy so that the odd chick at least is likely to fledge if there is a food shortage. During particularly bad spells of weather the adults may desert the nest for a few days, flying away from storm to feed and keep themselves alive. Young swifts are able to go into a state of torpor where their metabolism slows down and they await the return of warmth and food.



FLYING VISITS: On the Auchtermuir Swift Walk, Perth and Kinross Council Ranger Daniele Muir describes the birds' habits to a visiting party on the walk.

Fact File Union to preserve the species

THERE are several good sources of information available, especially on the internet. You can download the recently published Swift Newsletter from the Tayside Biodiversity website, www.taysidebiodiversity.co.uk or obtain it in printed form from Catherine Lloyd, tel: 01282 422042. The Concern for Swifts project has much useful information at www.concernforswifts.com and the co-ordinator, Claire Danieles, can be contacted on 0141 554 8202. There is also a wealth of guidance on the London's Swifts website at www.london-swifts.org.uk. The RSPB has more facts about the species on its website at www.rspb.org.uk/wildlife/birdguidance/migration/swift/index.asp and has information leaflets on many species, including swifts, tel: 0131 557 3136.

LOCAL councils and agencies have developed the Tayside Biodiversity Action Plan to conserve priority species and improve habitats. To help this species, the partners have come together in a Swift Interest Group that has started gathering data about swifts and producing guidance for architects and builders. Perth and Kinross Council Ranger Service asked the public to help report swift sightings and nest sites in 2005 and 2006. This summer, they are again involved in surveying these fantastic birds and would be pleased to receive further sightings and locations of nest sites or colonies to add to the Tayside Swift Map. This will help subsequent existing nest sites, or highlight potential artificial nesting sites to consider if developments work or property renovation is taking place within a 'hotspot' area. If anyone in Perth or Kinross is willing to help in the survey, or has any general



SCALABLE BIRDS: Swifts chase each other through the summer skies. queries about this delightful species, please contact Daniele Muir on daniel@kpc.gov.uk or phone for a chat on 01764 657872. The information needed is: How many birds can you see in the 'screaming colonies' - and where are they? Do you know of a specific nest site - and if, where? Please remember that all these birds are protected by law and should not be disturbed in any way. Catherine Lloyd, the Tayside Biodiversity Co-ordinator, is hoping to

inside the roof space of a building, or in holes in a wall. Swifts like a fairly dark, cool nest site and are able to enter through quite a small hole - smaller than pigeons, starlings or even sparrows can enter by. However, they are often excluded completely by gaps being cemented up or rotted and sealed ventilation holes. A Tayside Swift Nest Box Trail has been funded by SHS and a number of different styles of box are being tried out. The owners of buildings being used are playing CDs of swift calls to help attract swifts to the vicinity. This seems to be working at Cloan and Clonzieff near Auchtermuir, where swifts have been investigating the boxes. Advice Notes on 'Swifts in Historic Buildings' is available free of charge from either Concern for Swifts or the Tayside Biodiversity Partnership. (See Fact File for contact details).



HOSPITAL HOME: Local builder Ian Sandeman secures the swift nest boxes at Crieff Hospital watched on by Countryside Ranger Daniele Muir, Catherine Lloyd of the Tayside Biodiversity Partnership and Alison Ferguson, Ward Clerk, Ward 1 at Crieff Hospital.

Rangers in quest for swift return

IN THE latest move to encourage Strathearn people to do more to help return swift numbers in the area to previously recorded levels, Perth and Kinross Countryside Rangers will be erecting nesting boxes on the Crieff area office today.

Countryside Ranger, Daniele Muir, said swifts migrate from Africa to Scotland to breed, adding, "While these birds used to nest exclusively in caves, tree-holes and cliffs, countryside development has now removed a lot of these nest sites and most swifts now nest in buildings.

"Installing these nest boxes will hopefully provide the right sort of conditions that will encourage more of these remarkable birds to come back to this area to breed in years to come."

There will be two boxes put up at the council's Crieff offices and two boxes at Crieff Hospital.

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