



Swifts in Scotland

By Jonathan Willet

Swifts are.....

Fantastic, fabulous, screamy, swooshing, summery, comical, fluttery, foreboding (Devil's birds), superfast, fasters, snoozers, fascinating, easy to record, fun to watch, townies, villagers, viaducters, picky eaters, long distance fliers, fair weather feeders, flockers, monogamous, faithful.

Historically Swifts were.....

- Cliff nesters?
- or
- Tree nesters?
- Nesting in trees recently noted in Strathspey and near Glasgow.
- Cliff nesting on Eigg in the last 100 years.



Swifts and Buildings

- Since the advent of castles Swifts will have been using man-made structures.
- The industrial revolution triggered the massive increase in potential nesting areas.
- But the gross pollution would have limited the insects for them to feed on.
- 1950's flats are a favourite in C Scotland.

Swift populations

- In Europe the population increased from 1880 to 1980 but no statistics.
- Currently the population seems to be decreasing Europe-wide.
- In Stirling peak counts have slowly declined since a peak the early 1990's.
- 51, 62, 49% decrease according to BTO over the 1996 to 2002,3,4 period respectively. Slower declines in England and Wales
- But 1000+ Swifts feed at Strathclyde Loch from 1998 on.
- Very limited data.



*Adult Swift in flight.
Photo: Tom Lindroos,
courtesy of London's
Swifts.*

So we need baseline information

- Lets do a survey!
- Build on the work of the Cairngorms survey of 2005. *Okay we copied them.*
- NTS applies for a Highland Biodiversity Implementation Fund Grant.
- Gets a very capable Project Scotland Volunteer to deliver the project– Thalia.
- Disseminate the findings widely.

Highland Swift Survey 2006

- 137 records.
- From 48 town/ areas.
- 115 nest sites identified (inc. 73 from 2005).
- Fort William and Granton-on-Spey had the highest number of nesting pairs.
- Highest count 60 birds in Fort William.
- First sighting 4th May (Golspie & Inverness)
- Last sighting 17th August (Thurso).

Map of 2006 Swift Survey



Did the survey results surprise?

- Not really, confirmed what we thought.
- No nesting west of Fort William.
- No nesting in Northern and Western Isles.
- Lybster most northerly colony.
- Is this due to the weather?
- Suitable nest sites?
- Swifts in Stavanger but not much further north on the west coast of Norway.
- They are found north of the Arctic Circle.

Discussion

- There has likely major historical fluctuations in population size.
- Swift numbers may be at a peak, though this is declining.
- Available nesting sites is probably an issue, refurbishment, new builds etc.
- But so could conditions in their wintering sites.

Conclusion



- Maintain nesting sites in key areas, through awareness raising, planning advice and regulation.
- Maximise urban biodiversity, reduce pollution.
- Focus on what we can do. It is cheap and fairly straightforward.
- Keep enjoying our harbingers of Summer!