**Supporting swifts in Winchcombe**

Many people have noticed a big reduction in the numbers of swifts gloriously screaming over the house tops of Winchcombe over the last 20 or 30 years. Sadly, this mirrors the situation in the UK, where swift numbers have dropped by 60% in the last 25 years. This bird is about to be declared a red list ‘at risk’ species by the BTO (British Trust for Ornithology). Why is this happening?

One of the main causes of decline is loss of nesting sites. Unlike other, at risk, birds like the sparrow and starling, the swift *depends* on the nooks and crannies in roofs and walls of human habitation. As we have become a richer society, more money is spent on repairing ‘defects’ while older buildings are demolished and replaced by defect-free buildings. This continuing and increasing trend is leading to the decline in swift numbers here and elsewhere in Europe.

There are many incredible swift facts. The swift is the fastest bird in the world on level flight (peregrines have a faster diving speed) reaching speeds of around 70 mph. It flies to the UK from the middle of Africa from around early May to early August to breed, travelling 6000 miles each way. Swift pairs only have one brood in this time; it takes 20 days incubation before the eggs hatch; it’s a further 6 to 8 weeks, depending on weather conditions, before the swift leaves the nest. These very long periods, compared with most birds, are because after a swiftlet leaves its nest for the first time, it never normally lands again until it returns to breed – so it spends a period of around nine months in the air! It sleeps on the wing and is the only bird known to mate on the wing. It is a truly amazing bird!

What can we do to support swifts in Winchcombe? Firstly, we can raise awareness of the issue. Secondly, we can think about any refurbishments to our houses, and if possible apply a light touch to roof improvements. Thirdly, we could consider fitting nest boxes to our homes. Finally, we could ask the planning authorities to ensure swift bricks are fitted to new local estates.

To support these aims we are forming a Winchcombe Swift Support Group (WSSG) which will, in particular, provide guidance on making/obtaining swift boxes, fitting the boxes and attracting swifts.

We have carried out swift surveys in Winchcombe over the last few years, from which we know the sites of the main concentration of our remaining swifts – from the beginning of Gloucester Street, past the Corner Cupboard up to the North Street junction; and then down North Street to the Old Police Station and Fire Station. I fitted a swift box to my home in Mill Lane (in the centre of the swift population) in the autumn of 2019 . With the aid of a boom box and CD I managed to attract swifts to the box in 2020, which is unusual because it can take years to attract them. I fitted a camera in the early months of this year and to my delight the swifts returned in early June and laid an egg. The egg hatched and the swiftlet left the nest to head for Africa in the middle of August. I felt very privileged to see this. If you fit a swift box you may not be so lucky, but rest assured you are likely to get other birds in the box such as the red listed sparrow, so you will still be helping our bird life.

If you are interested in joining the WSSG please contact Brian Weller. Mobile: 07826 484050 or email: wssg7@gmail.com