

Swallow Roost Project *Newsletter*



This is the third edition of the Swallow Roost Project Newsletter. If you require further copies, then please contact Bridget Griffin at The Nunnery.

September 2005

Number 3

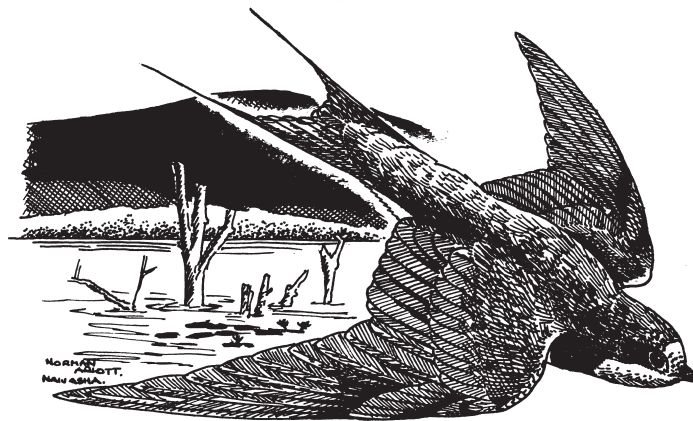
Swallow Roost Project Continuing!

The Swallow Project was due to finish after 2004 season. However, I have received much enthusiastic support for the project from many of you, and a willingness to continue catches at roosts, so it was good news when I was informed that we had the funding to carry on for another two years. It is great that everyone is keen to keep going with their roost sites and it will mean that we have a bigger dataset to work on when analysis commences in 2007.

One thing the project has highlighted is the transitory nature of many of the roosts in the UK, particularly the smaller inland roosts. When the project was first conceived we were

expecting to find roost sites where large numbers of birds could be caught and measured throughout the pre-migratory period. While this is the case at a few coastal sites, such as Icklesham (Sussex), a known migration stopover point for many trans-Saharan migrants, the majority of sites registered under the project are unpredictable in the numbers present both within the same season and between years.

This has meant that fewer data have been collected than we expected. The extra two years more on the project will increase the dataset and allow us to undertake more detailed analyses.



Norman Arlott

Results 2004

Over 12,000 Swallows were caught and ringed at roosts in 2004, beating the previous year's total by about 1,000 birds. There were two controls of foreign-ringed birds, both from Cape Town, South Africa and caught in early September, one in Fife, and the other in Suffolk. We have 46 retrap records on the ORACLE Database at BTO HQ for 2004, a large percentage of these are from roosts in Scotland (Fife, Highland and Orkney). There were four retraps from a site in Co Cork, Republic of Ireland, the latest recapture being of a juvenile originally ringed at the same roost in mid July and recaptured in late August. Unsurprisingly, given the large numbers of juveniles present at roosts compared to adult birds, the majority of retraps were of juveniles. However, of the adult retraps, most are birds ringed either in the nest or as juveniles the previous year at the same site or in the immediate vicinity.

The BTO ORACLE database shows that there has been a notable increase in the number of Swallow recoveries, with the total for 2003 (201 records), for example, being an increase of 64% when compared to the mean of the previous five years.

Table 1 shows the numbers of juveniles and adults ringed at each site since the start of the project in 2002.

Sexing Adult Swallows

One important area of analysis will focus on the weight and fat score data to look for any differences between adult males and females. For this reason it is important to take these and all other measurements (especially tail fork and tail length) in every adult caught at roosts. From the tail fork and tail length measurements it is possible to sex the majority of adults caught, so please ensure you record these data in IPMR.

The number of pulli Swallows ringed continues to rise (Fig 1), with the total for 2004 at over 11,000: an increase of 155% since 1998.

Future analyses

With two more years of data we should be able to look at regional differences in weight gain strategies: do birds in the north of Scotland do the same as those on the south coast of England for instance? Do birds roosting in different habitats do the same thing? And how much variation between years is there? Most excitingly, perhaps, we hope to be able to see whether birds migrating through Britain use different routes and so whether each roost has a particular catchment area. This will give a detailed picture of migratory behaviour in the Swallow, which should help our understanding of population processes of this popular species.

Rob Robinson (Senior Population Biologist, BTO)

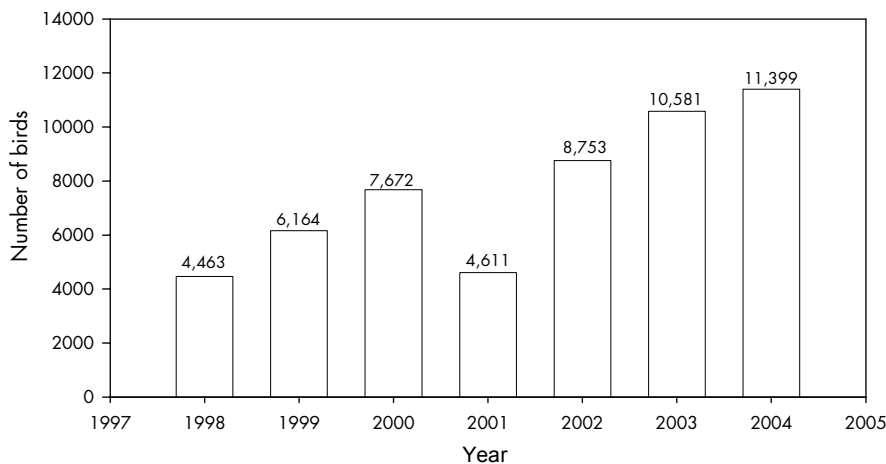


Figure 1. Number of pulli Swallow ringed 1998-2004

Table 1. Numbers of juvenile & adult Swallows ringed as part of the Swallow Roost Project 2002-2004

| ROOST SITE | 2002 | | 2003 | | 2004 | |
|---|--------------|------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|--------------|
| | Juvs | Ads | Juvs | Ads | Juvs | Ads |
| ENGLAND | | | | | | |
| SOUTH | | | | | | |
| Slapton, Devon | 773 | 69 | 1192 | 41 | 989 | 54 |
| Abbotsbury, Dorset | 135 | 5 | 73 | 2 | 517 | 6 |
| Titchfield Haven, Hants | 281 | 15 | 336 | 25 | 75 | 2 |
| Farlington Marshes, Hants | 193 | 42 | 312 | 84 | 236 | 23 |
| Winchester, Hants | 0 | 0 | 38 | 3 | 2 | 0 |
| Icklesham, Sussex | 1,884 | 153 | 1,090 | 296 | 1,642 | 174 |
| Pitsea Marshes, Essex | 109 | 17 | 70 | 7 | 0 | 0 |
| Harty Marshes, Kent NO ROOST | | | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| EAST | | | | | | |
| Shotley, Suffolk | 374 | 41 | 231 | 29 | 680 | 46 |
| Levington, Suffolk | 265 | 7 | 29 | 1 | 169 | 0 |
| Orford Ness, Suffolk | 27 | 0 | 166 | 24 | 20 | 4 |
| Codicote, Herts | 299 | 36 | 84 | 6 | 150 | 27 |
| Santon Downham, Norfolk (resigned 2004) | 192 | 22 | 10 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| South Lopham, Suffolk | | | 88 | 14 | 272 | 23 |
| Sizewell, Suffolk | | | 26 | 5 | 60 | 2 |
| Wiggenhall St Mary, Norfolk | | | 48 | 1 | - | - |
| CENTRAL | | | | | | |
| Swadlincote, Derbyshire | 344 | 85 | 40 | 1 | 224 | 44 |
| Rodbaston College, Staffordshire | | | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Much Marcle, Hereford & Worcester | 68 | 2 | 82 | 20 | 0 | 0 |
| Chelmarsh Reservoir, Shropshire | | | 10 | 0 | 10 | 2 |
| NORTH | | | | | | |
| Ribchester, Lancs | 65 | 5 | 59 | 6 | 36 | 3 |
| Little Givendale, N Yorkshire | | | 418 | 40 | 495 | 74 |
| Denaby Ings, S Yorkshire | | | 300 | 23 | 106 | 13 |
| Pocklington Canal, Humberside | 141 | 11 | 135 | 7 | 5 | 2 |
| IRELAND | | | | | | |
| Pollardstown Fen, Kildare | 294 | 17 | 281 | 28 | 0 | 0 |
| Youghal, Cork | | | 489 | 54 | 529 | 69 |
| Arklow Marsh, Wicklow | | | 261 | 18 | 30 | 1 |
| Oxford Island, Armagh | | | 196 | 5 | 109 | 12 |
| Pallas Lake, Offaly | | | | | 90 | 28 |
| SCOTLAND | | | | | | |
| Graemeshall Loch, Orkney | 354 | 15 | 980 | 51 | 651 | 52 |
| Kilconquhar, Fife | 372 | 46 | 1,751 | 182 | 2,781 | 143 |
| Castlandhill, Fife | 202 | 39 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Castle Stuart, Highland | | | 109 | 17 | 248 | 56 |
| Loch Brora, Highland | | | 61 | 4 | 28 | 2 |
| Pitglassie, Highland | | | 187 | 14 | 92 | 15 |
| Loch Achnacloich, Highland | | | 190 | 45 | 1,076 | 125 |
| Black Isle, Highland | 148 | 7 | 156 | 22 | 0 | 0 |
| WALES | | | | | | |
| Llangorse Lake, Powys | | | | | 115 | 2 |
| TOTAL | 6,520 | 634 | 9,499 | 1,076 | 11,437 | 1,004 |

Tape luring success at a Scottish Swallow roost

Swallow roost at Kilconquhar

We have been ringing this roost for five years. It is a small, shallow, eutrophic loch surrounded by a narrow reed bed with mature willow/alder carr behind. The area where we ring is pure reedbed about 100 metres wide. The reeds are not tall at only seven or eight feet. A boardwalk was built out to the edge of the reeds in about two foot of water. It is possible to walk on this boardwalk without disturbing roosting birds. The first year up to 20,000 Swallows came in to roost but we were told this was exceptional. The next three years saw a maximum of less than 1,000, although there were more in 2004. A tape recording of Swallow song was used on a loop tape with a single cone speaker half way up the mid pole of two 60' nets. This system invariably led to birds coming into roost at dusk and, with small numbers, we caught up to 40% of the flock. Very occasionally a few Swallows would be caught pre-roost.

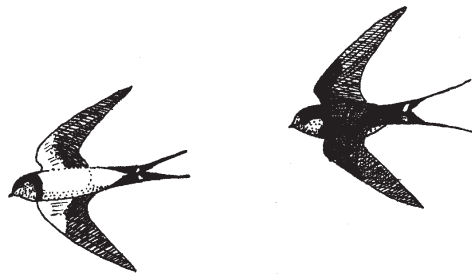
In early August 2004 we changed to using a CD recording of Swallow song. This is not a loud recording even played at full volume. We often ring from late afternoon to catch migrant Sedge Warblers and the like and at times the Swallow CD was turned on. As soon as we did this it became apparent that this pure sound changed Swallow behaviour. Even though Swallows were not obviously near the loch, the CD would attract birds overhead almost immediately. Generally, if Swallows were about they would quickly form a flock over the nets. Once a single bird was in the net then more quickly followed. It is almost as though they think nets are a line of telephone wires. Emptying the net would often disturb them and they would not return. Sometimes, however, two or three large pre-roost catches were made. By 2004, we realised that the situation was more complex since this phenomenon certainly did not happen every night but mainly after a warm day. We also began to notice these pre-roost birds were much heavier than those that came in the same night at dusk. The average weight difference was

2 g or more with some juvenile birds weighing 24 g. I regret now that this data was not really collected carefully enough to be certain of separating pre-roost catches on the nights when many birds were caught and would need to be collected differently in future. There is not a single occurrence of a pre-roost bird being recaptured later at dusk though the roost flock was invariably intercepted. I assume these substantial numbers of pre-roost migrants are passage birds drawn in by the CD. The whole population caught over the years of study is transitory at the loch with no retraps in the same year. Only one bird from 5,000 ringed has been retrapped at any distance. It may be that they go into the black hole in East Fife that is the fate of nearly everything I ring except Storm Petrels, but perhaps it does actually mean something. The majority of Kilconquhar birds were caught pre-roost and perhaps many Swallows on passage do not use reed bed roosts and as such are much less likely to be recaptured.

Jim Cobb (Fife)

Use of tape lures at Swallow project roosts

The findings from Jim Cobb at his roost site in Fife make an interesting read, however it is important that for catches made under the BTO Swallow Roost Project, that the tape lures are set in the early evening to attract birds down that are already in the vicinity and likely therefore to come into roost at the site or nearby.

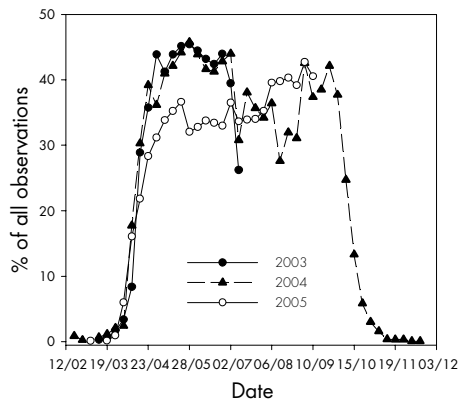


BTO Collection

2005 - a slow start for Swallows

Results from BirdTrack (<http://www.birdtrack.net>) showed that fewer Swallows were being recorded this spring compared with 2003 and 2004 (about 15% down). Poor weather at Easter with strong northerly winds would have made it difficult for the Swallows to find food, and records of snow in Morocco during February and March, when birds would have been on their way back to their breeding grounds, would have delayed arrival and meant that many birds arrived in poor condition. We have also heard from some of our volunteers of adult Swallows being found dead on or near nests. One birder recorded finding 50 dead Swallows in mid May at Hughtown, Isles of Scilly. Post-mortem results showed starvation as the cause.

The following are snippets from the weekly diary on BirdTrack based on numbers reported by contributors:



Proportion of Swallows recorded on BirdTrack lists

Judging from the feedback so far for 2005, it looks like our Swallows have managed to catch up in some areas. We are having our best year so far at Lopham Fen, Norfolk and other sites around the country indicate good numbers of juveniles, see page 7 for more details.

Mad moult stories!

Ringers have also come across some Swallows as well as other trans-Saharan migrants showing suspended moult. One ringer in Lincolnshire notes:

“We caught a number of House Martins showing suspended moult, particularly of the outer lesser and median coverts, on some birds approximately half of the wing was unmoulted. Some also showed signs of unmoulted tails with prominent growth bars across the whole tail and generally brown coloured tails as in juvenile plumage.”

At our local Swallow roost at Lopham Fen, Norfolk on 31 August 2005 we caught a juvenile Sand Martin which was in active wing moult, so keep a look out for any unusual moults - you never know what you might find!

29.3.05 “Despite the good start to the Easter break, there was still no great rush of migrants, and the bulk of our Swallows are still absent!”

8.4.05 “Swallows have arrived on time but numbers are very low compared with previous years.”

In May migrants continued to arrive at Portland (Dorset) and you might be interested in the extract below from their website relating to 15 May: “Visible passage was still strong, with remarkable numbers of Sand Martins for the time of year; a 90 minute sample count on the West Cliffs provided totals of 930 Swallows, 640 House Martins, 104 Sand Martins and 18 Swifts flying north.”

25.4.05 Swallows are still thin on the ground with one BirdTrack recorder commenting “there were more Black Terns at the reservoir than Swallows!”



Swallow caught 22 August 2004 (Jill Warwick)

News

New Release of IPMR!

A new release of IPMR will be launched later this year, which will have many enhancements and will include all the recent species splits and new county codes. The format for inputting your Swallow data will stay the same. As soon as the new version is available, we will put it onto the BTO website and put messages on the various Email Forums to inform you all to upgrade! I would like to take this opportunity to thank Mark Cubitt for his continuing work in developing this fantastic piece of software. Many thanks also to all Swallow Roost participants for getting 100% of Swallow data submitted electronically.

You may find that some new ring sequences are not on v2.1.75 of IPMR, if you come across this problem there is an interim fix available on the BTO Website on the v2 download page: <http://www.bto.org/ringing/ringsoft/ipmr/index.htm>. The .exe file will update the IPMR reference database with the new sequences, but you should still upgrade to the new 2.2 version when it is released later this year.



Dick Jeeves

Ringling pulli Swallows

We recently put out a renewed appeal to ring Swallow pulli to assist with working out the catchment areas of our roost sites for juveniles. Not all ringers will have the necessary pullus endorsement for open nesting species, so ringer Malcolm Burgess came up with a cunning alternative plan!

“For those ringers like myself who are not allowed to ring open nesting pullus my solution is to wait until the Swallows have fledged and then block the barn/stable entrance with a mist net at first light. I usually manage to catch them all, and the adults as well. It is better to wait two weeks after they have fledged, otherwise they tend to stay put. I have a new Swallow site this year which I plan to do late summer - its light later and I'm hoping to catch first and second brood birds as well as the adults all in one go!”

2005 Season - News from around the country

Gressingham, Lancs (Maize)

14.8.2005 Our roost is going pretty well - processed about 100 or so now (total catch of 350) in three visits. We've had two controls - one ringed locally in the nest and one ringed in the central lakes (also as a nestling). In the three visits there has been a very low number of adults suggesting they're still breeding. We have also had virtually no Sand Martins (last year it was probably about 25% Sand Martins - I think they've gone from here this year).

Richard du Feu

Slapton, Devon (Reed)

12.8.2005 Our Swallow roost at Slapton is not behaving itself at all this year! No one told them where the regular roost (with easy access for the ringers) is! Also, they are mobile using several sites. There is no consistency in the numbers of birds either and it would appear that birds are clearing off fast, possibly using the high pressure over the last week? At this time of the year we would expect to see between 5,000 and 10,000 birds. On Monday night there were about 500 birds going into a new roost site, the next night some 5,000 went in and the next night less than 100, whilst another flock of about 100 shot off and apparently went somewhere else altogether.

It is strange that we have had problems with the roost this year as there seems to be a lot of Swallows around, they are just not coming into roost. This being the case, our Swallow catch totals are looking fairly bleak this year...so far.

There are consolations of course, watching three hobbys chasing the 100 odd Swallows around is good sport!

Nik Ward

Codicote, Herts (Maize)

15.8.2005 I have been out three times in the last 10 days checking the arrival (sorry, non-arrival) of Swallows at my maize field roost. Well, a dozen or so did fly over, but showed no evidence of going into this particular field; there was no circling around for a few passes. In previous years I have had at least a hundred around by now. There is a

possibility there are maize fields that are suitable in the direction that I saw the birds flying. Have not been that way this year so I must go and have a look and check one evening if I find any.

I also have a feeling that the maize at my site is a week or so later than previous years; although it looks high enough there may be other crops around that the birds prefer. I must check with the farmer the relative date of sowing. But most likely, if the farmers talk to each other, other crops should be at the same stage so the contractor can harvest all the fields within a few days as he normally does. With a bit of luck, having said all this, the roost will now build up!

Tom Kittle

Youghal, Cork, Republic of Ireland (Reed)

30.8.2005 My totals this year are ahead of the last two years (415 birds to date).

Pat Smiddy

Pitglassie, Highland (Reed)

9.8.2005 One good catch then roost dispersed.

Loch Brora, Highland (Reed)

9.8.2005 No birds caught so far!

Ronnie Graham

Kilconquhar, Fife (Reed)

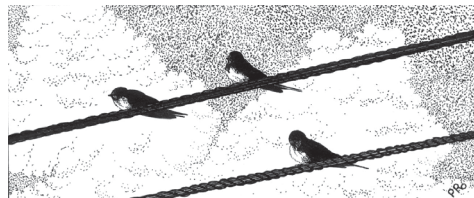
30.8.2005 Up to 1,000 caught so far!

Jim Cobb

Lopham Fen, Norfolk (Reed)

31.8.2005 Up to c 350 caught so far, with two controls.

Bridget Griffin



Paul Roper

**Swallow Roost Project
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More information on the Web at:
www.bto.org/ringing/swallowroostproject

Can you help? If you are interested in writing something for forthcoming issues of the newsletter, please contact Bridget Griffin. Budding artists are also invited to submit Swallow or Swallow related drawings for inclusion.



Steve Carter