

Cherwell Swifts Conservation Report 2018



Photo: Roger Wyatt

Introduction

The new edition of David Lack's *Swifts in a Tower* was launched in May 1st, but the Museum Swifts had not arrived in time to mark the occasion. By early May Swift watchers around the country were worried that some disaster had occurred on migration. However 3 months later after fine and warm weather for much of June and July, many of these concerns had been allayed. The Museum Swifts recorded more nests, and the largest number of young fledged since 2010, and records from Combe, Ledwell and Drayton indicated that nests and offspring numbers were at least up to recent averages. Yes, there were reports of fewer Swifts from some places as well but it had not been the disastrous year many had feared.

The Museum Swifts eventually arrived on May 7th. This is in line with the date of first arrivals recorded by Lack in the 1950s and, as the new edition of the book points out, the 4 years before 2018 followed a similar pattern. In contrast the mean arrival date for the years 2007-13 was 26th April.

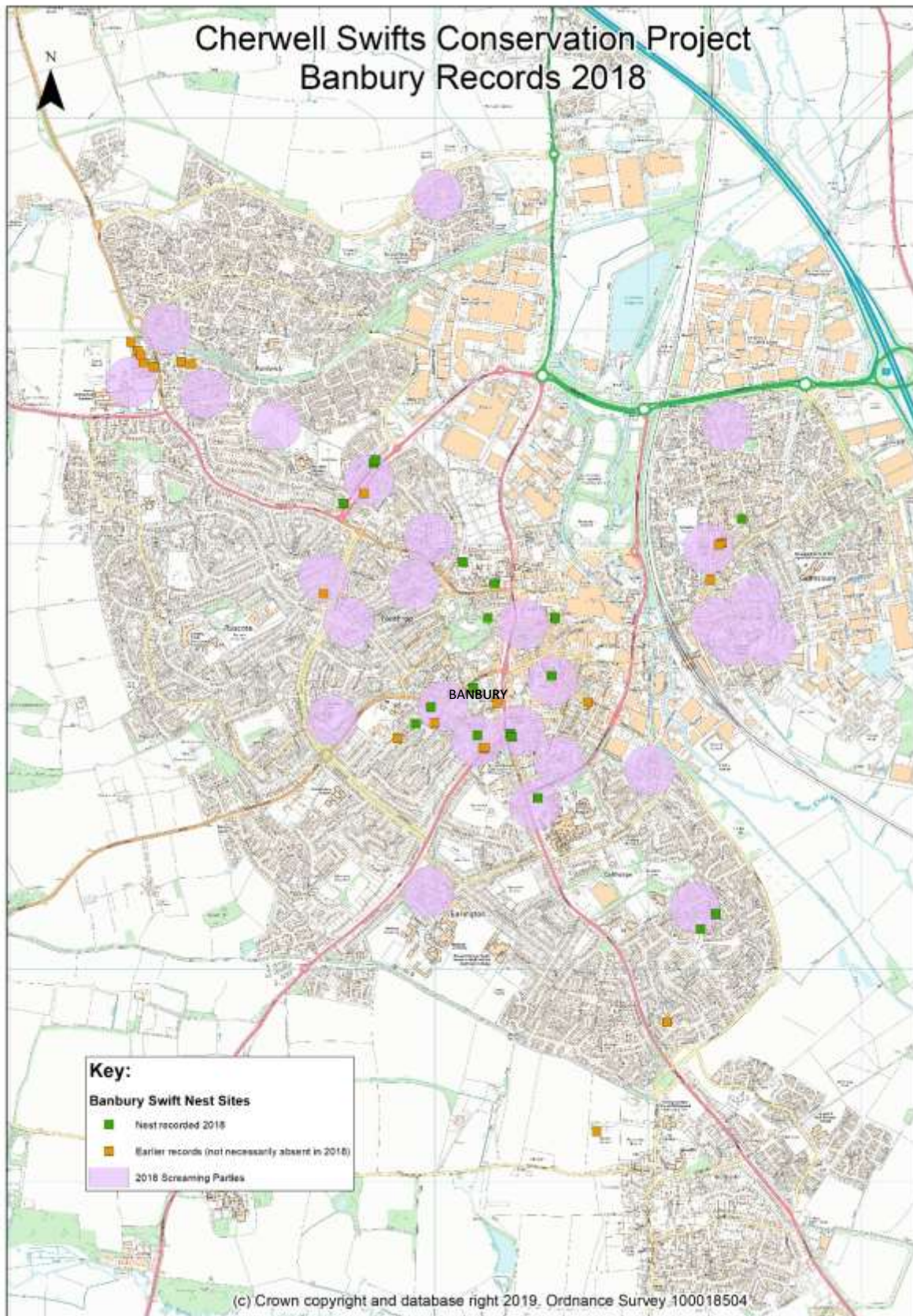
Cherwell Swifts

Swift Awareness Week

During the first-ever national Swift Awareness Week dozens of walks, talks and other events helped to raise the profile of Swifts around the country. Locally we joined in with 5 events – a walk in Banbury, two in different parts of Oxford, a walk and talk in Kidlington and a Swift Lunch at Bodicote House, the offices of the Cherwell District Council. The aim of the lunch was to keep Swifts and the Council's commitment to Swift conservation in the minds of staff generally and planners in particular. Many thanks to Sue Marchand for facilitating this.

Banbury

We made a special effort to find out more about Banbury's Swifts this year; not before time. A dozen volunteers carried out surveys in 500 x 500 metre squares. We made new finds in



some squares and drew blank in others, but we learnt a lot. 4 pairs were still nesting under the Stonesfield slate tiles alongside House Sparrows at the Cope Road Health Centre, and there were 5 pairs in the eaves at the centuries-old St John's School. It was also encouraging to find Swifts nesting in some suitable newer buildings. Thus small colonies were noted in the 1970s Bankside development on the southern edge of the town, and Swift nest bricks were being used at Highmarket House, a newly-opened care home near the People's Park.



Two Swift walks were organised in the town. For one we teamed up with the BBOWT Wild Banbury project. We also had a stall at their Wild Parks and Gardens event in July. We plan to do more in Banbury in 2019.

Highmarket House and the Swift bricks

Sanctuary Housing

Around the District Swifts often choose 1950s/1960s council-built homes for nesting. The ones not in private ownership are maintained by Sanctuary Housing, the social landlords. With help from Sue Marchand and support from Liz Moore in Kidlington where many of the remaining Swifts rely on these houses, we have at last made a link with Sanctuary. We know which properties they manage there and will share information with them about which ones have nesting Swifts. We will also discuss options if maintenance work is needed at any of them and possibly get some nest boxes installed too. An article about Swifts is due to appear in Sanctuary's spring newsletter.

Bicester

Bicester also has Swift colonies in Sanctuary Homes and these will be included in our discussions with Sanctuary.

The town is now almost literally being swamped with new developments. Perhaps that is the motivation for such a strong group of green activists in town. They provide lots of information and support for Swifts. We have not succeeded in getting the numbers of new Swift nest places installed in these new developments as I would have liked, but we have had some successes, and we hope there will be at least 40 bricks in Phase 2 of the development at Langford Village (Wretchwick). This is appropriate because we have recently discovered that Swifts are nesting in an earlier Langford village development built in the 1990s. They have found small gaps on top of some of the walls under the eaves.

Bodicote and Bloxham

We have had complete records of Swifts' nests from these two villages for several years now. Both have about 60 nesting pairs. Like all the information we collect it helps our advocacy with planners and developers, but it also provides a baseline for monitoring population changes. The villages are not similar in all respects though. Swifts have taken to nest boxes in Bodicote for several years, and this year all six boxes at the church have been used, but in Bloxham Swifts have only now started to show an interest in them.

Beyond Cherwell

West Oxford

Following last year's success in getting Swift bricks into new developments in Chipping Norton, John Dunleavy and I met with the West Oxford District Council ecologist Melanie Dodd. She needs no encouragement to promote Swift-friendly building work, and there will be plenty of opportunities for that in West Oxford.



Photo: Sue Chapmane

For instance a new garden village of about 2000 houses is being planned near **Eynsham**. A strong Swift presence in Eynsham itself (over 40 people attended a Swift walk there), coupled with the support of the Council should ensure good provision for Swifts in that large development.

Also in West Oxford, I have occasionally been involved in **Charlbury**. There are several proactive Swift enthusiasts in the town. I gave a talk to help raise money for a wonderful piece of community art at the Charlbury Community Centre. The mosaic was unveiled during the year.



Photo: Tony Lloyd

South Northants

We, or rather Sally Beard surveyed Swifts in Middleton Cheney and Kings Sutton (as well as in Banbury) this year. I hope this initiative will encourage other activities and interest in those villages and help cement our link with the South Northants Council.

Oxford Swift City

It was a good news year for the RSPB-led project. The Museum Swifts enjoyed the summer weather. The new edition of Swifts in a Tower was launched and sold very well. The City Council gave planning permission for a Swift tower to be installed in the Parks and as the 2 year project ends, it is encouraging to know that a strong Oxford Swift Group is already active. Over 300 nest boxes are being put up and planning for another year of Swift surveys is under way.

Thanks

Thanks as usual to everyone who has surveyed, monitored and reported on nest sites and sent in records. Thank you to all who have raised alerts about building work and about opportunities for installing bricks and boxes or made space for Swifts in their own homes; also to everyone who has organised events, walks and meetings; to TVERC for checking the records and submitting them to the Council; to the ever-willing team of nest box installers; to Daniel Messer for the lovely maps and to Sue Marchand, my indispensable link with the Cherwell DC.

Chris Mason

March 2019