

Instructions to Surveyors

When to carry out the survey

The best time to survey for Swifts (in the UK) is early to mid-July, when the population is at its biggest. We are focusing on Swift Awareness Week (3 – 11 July) but as spring has been late this year little after that will be fine as well. The best time of day to survey is - from half an hour before dawn to two hours after or, more realistically, from two hours before dusk to half an hour after. Warm to hot and dry days are best.

What to look for

Look for swifts flying round and round buildings and along streets at or just above roof top level and below, screaming. These are the local Swifts, breeders and non-breeding juveniles who have attached themselves to the flock, and they are demonstrating their territory, we think, by this noisy circling flight.

Beware confusing the Swifts with Swallows and Martins but neither of the latter species scream around in this way.

Swifts flying at a high level, well above the buildings, should be ignored. These may not be local, indeed could be from anywhere so shouldn't be included in counts of our local colonies.

We suggest that you walk slowly around your nominated area seeking out low-flying, screaming Swifts. Count the circling flocks until you have an accurate estimate of birds in flight through your area. You will need to do this several times as they are fast flyers and their criss-crossing flight-paths can be very confusing for the observer to disentangle. Try to avoid counting birds seen over adjacent areas to minimise double counting.

Mark the areas where the "screaming parties" are circulating on the map and note the time, date bird numbers and location on the record sheet.

Closing in on the nests

Later, on one or more subsequent evenings, conduct repeat visits to the areas previously identified, to listen as the Swifts pass buildings. Listen out for the screams of Swifts still in their nests, which will answer the birds screaming as they pass by outside. Add those birds you can hear but cannot see to the total number.

These answering calls may help you to locate nests which, other than man-made nest boxes, may be very difficult to spot. By keeping your eyes open in the area you have identified as being favoured by screaming parties, you may be able to spot nests either as the Swifts enter or leave them, and just at dusk and shortly after, when the adults return to spend the night with the chicks.

Again, if you spot a nest, record the date, time, the number of birds you see going in and most importantly – so someone else can find the nest again – as detailed a description of the nest's location as possible.

Reporting back

Please send copies of your completed record sheet and map to Andrew Graham at 6, Morrison Avenue, Tisbury, by the end of August. Then we can compile results and let everyone know what was found.