

Swallow Roost Project *Newsletter*



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

May 2004

Number 2

More ringers get involved.....

After the very encouraging start in 2002 we now have 37 roost sites registered for the project (see map below). Many thanks to all of you for showing continued enthusiasm after the busy summer months doing CES, RAS studies etc.

New sites for 2003 included a cluster of roosts up on the Black Isle in the Highlands of Scotland; two more sites in Eire and one for Northern Ireland, bringing the total to four for Ireland as a

whole. We also have a few more sites inland in north and central England, which has helped to fill in gaps. I also hope to be able to put Wales on the map for 2004. After a successful joint Members/Ringers' regional conference in March, interest was shown by a ringer from Powys, mid-Wales. Many thanks to all of you who continue to support this project, let's make the final year really count!



Locations of Swallow Roosts registered 2002/2003. New sites shown as filled squares.

Results 2003

Over 18,000 Swallows have been ringed at roosts since the start of the project with the total ringed in 2003 at over 11,000 (see Table 1). The percentage of juveniles to adults was 89:11, which is very similar to the 2002 results (91:9).

Since the start of the project there have been 107 controls and 77 local retraps where either the ringing or finding place relates to a Swallow Project roost site. We have shown the most interesting ones below:

P715367	3	26.07.2003	Graemeshall Loch: 58° 53'N 2°54'W (Orkney)
	R	01.10.2003	Deltebre, Tarragona: 40°47'N 0°44'E 2,028km SSE (Spain)

This is our only foreign control and with a good movement of 2028km in 67 days. Interestingly the weight at ringing was 21.3g and at finding 24.1g.

R680935	3	19.08.2003	Loch Brora: 58°1'N 3°57'W (Highlands)
	R	09.09.2003	Icklesham: 50°54'N 0°40'E (Sussex) 845km SSE

N885632	1	10.07.2000	Spurn Head: 53°34'N 0°6'E (Humberside)
	R	25.09.2003	Icklesham: 50°54'N 0°40'E (Sussex) 229km SSE

R704046	3	18.09.2003	Graemeshall Loch: 58°53'N 2°54'W (Orkney)
	R	03.10.2003	Icklesham: 50°54'N 0°40'E (Sussex) 916km SSE

R327056	3	24.08.2002	Rosehaugh Mains, Black Isle: 57°34'N 4°13'W (Highland)
	R	22.09.2002	Near Ribchester: 53°48'N 2°35'W (Lancs) 431km SSE

In all cases the weights of the birds had increased on finding by between 1-2g which ties in with the results seen in the graph in the first newsletter.

Many of the controls and retraps relate to birds caught at the roost site in Orkney and the data suggest that birds ringed on Orkney as pulli are still using this roost site in early September, which does not leave much time for stopovers at other roosts in UK before leaving for the continent.

Fig 1 below shows the movements of Swallows by month, where either the ringing or finding locations were project roost sites, or both. As we would expect the peak time for movements was September.

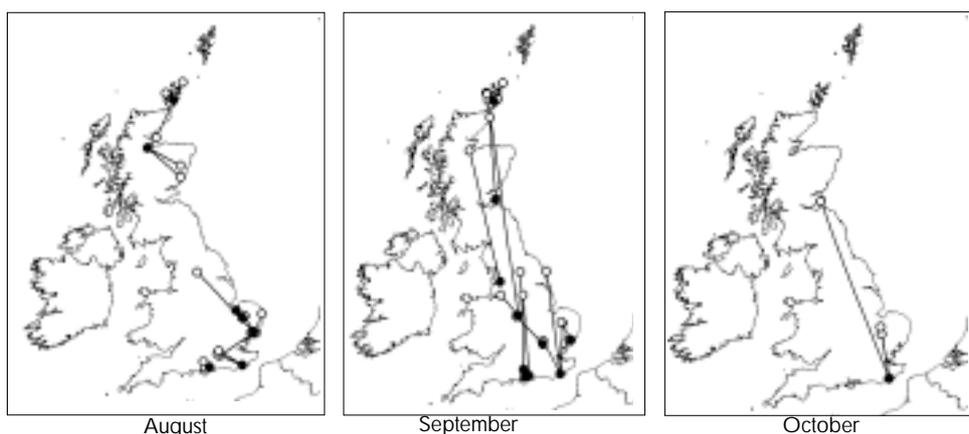


Figure 1. Within year movements of Swallows by month o - ringing locations • - recovery locations

Table 1. Total Juveniles and Adults caught by month 2003

ROOST SITE	July		Aug		Sept		Oct	
	Juvs	Ads	Juvs	Ads	Juvs	Ads	Juvs	Ads
SOUTH WEST								
Slapton, Devon	280	9	564	14	348	18		
Abbotsbury, Dorset			62	1	11	1		
SOUTH								
Titchfield Haven, Hants	39	1	232	16	65	8		
Farlington Marshes, Hants			171	35	141	49		
SOUTH-EAST								
Icklesham, Sussex			256	23	1272	248	185	18
Pitsea Marshes, Essex			70	7				
EAST								
Shotley, Suffolk			120	13	83	16		
Levington, Suffolk			29	1				
Orfordness, Suffolk			39	2	127	22		
Codicote, Herts			66	6	17			
Santon Downham, Norfolk			10	1				
South Lopham, Suffolk	72	4	9	3	7	7		
Sizewell, Suffolk			17	4	4			
Wiggenhall St Mary, Norfolk			48	1				
WEST								
Much Marcle, Herefordshire	81	15	1	5				
Chelmarsh Reservoir, Shropshire			26	1	87	17		
CENTRAL ENGLAND								
Swadlincote, Derbyshire			40	1	0			
Denaby Ings, S Yorkshire			95	5	205	18		
Rodbaston College, Staffordshire			19	2	119	7		
NORTH-WEST								
Ribchester, Lancashire			44	5	15	1		
Little Givendale, N Yorkshire			248	13	170	27		
NORTH-EAST								
Pocklington Canal, Humberside			10		125	7		
SCOTLAND								
Graemeshall Loch, Orkney	134	1	360	9	475	38		
Kilconquhar, Fife			849	94	672	91	153	1
Castlandhill, Fife			61					
Castle Stuart, Highland			92	14	17	3		
Loch Brora, Highland			61	4				
Pitglassie, Highland			149	8	38	6		
Loch Achnacloich, Highland	43	17	125	19	74	8		
Black Isle, Highland	21	1	107	14	35	7		
IRELAND								
Pollardstown Fen, S Ireland			120	10	136	11	25	7
Youghal, S Ireland	109	4	186	20	143	25	17	2
Arklow Marsh			150	9	111	9		
TOTAL	779	52	4436	360	4497	644	380	28

Where have all the large roosts gone?

Since the start of the roost project there has been a lot of interest in the size and habitat of the roosts that Swallows use and many comments from ringers that the large roosts from the 70's and 80's appear to have disappeared. The BTO are currently sorting through all the archive data and we came across some cards filled in as part of the 1950's Swallow Roost Enquiry (before my time!). I had a brief look at these and found that most of the cards were filled out for Warwickshire, Staffordshire and the Midlands, which interestingly are all counties where we have no sites registered! Most sites were reedbeds of around 1-2 acres in size and the numbers recorded reached maximums of 10-25,000 birds. One site particularly caught my eye, Bedworth Slough,

which when I was a youngster back in the early 1970's, was a regular haunt. From what I can remember this site was a very small area of reed within a built up area of housing, next to a main road. I don't remember there being a Swallow roost there, but back in the late 1950's records of 25,000 birds were recorded in September. I would be interested to hear comments on this subject from others, particularly from anyone who remembers large Swallow roosts in their area, which are no longer present today.

There has also been some discussion on the use of maize in preference to reed by Swallows and Dennis Elphick kindly looked into the history of maize usage in Cheshire, his findings are summarized below.

Barn Swallows roosting in maize in Cheshire 1989-2003

Swallows have regularly roosted in reedbeds at a number of locations throughout Cheshire. The traditional roost at Knutsford Moor was ringed on a regular basis in conjunction with pulli ringing at farms within a 20 km radius during the 1970s by the South Manchester Ringing Group. In 1989, roosts were recorded in maize for the first time in Cheshire, near Sandbach (Ford & Elphick 1993). Such roosts were then reported regularly during the period 1991-1996, particularly in the Knutsford and Sandbach areas and often in spite of the availability of reedbeds nearby. After 1996 there was an apparent decline.

The note in *British Birds* was thought to record only the second instance of Swallows roosting in maize in the UK. However, in response to that note, G W Hudson of Chapel-en-le-Frith, Stockport reported that he had watched large numbers at Marton Mere (a reed-fringed lake on the outskirts of Blackpool, Lancs) in late August 1984. This roost dwindled to just two birds on 27th and a new roost site was found nearby on 29th just south of Poulton-le-Fylde in a small field of maize well away from any reeds. The following evening ca 5,000 entered the latter roost. This phenomenon was discussed with many

birdwatchers at the time but it was not thought unusual!

In north Cheshire, where members of the Merseyside RG have spent many hours searching for Swallow roosts over a 25 year period, birds have only once been found roosting in maize (David Norman *pers com*). This is probably because maize is a relatively scarce crop in north Cheshire and possibly because there are plenty of reedbeds available. However, in late August 2002, a small roost of about 200 birds was found in maize near Thornton-le-Moors on the edge of the Stanlow oil refinery between Chester and the



Mersey Estuary. David comments that this seemed surprising as there was a good, wet reedbed available within one mile or so at Stanlow and, indeed, within a few days up to 2,000 birds were using that reedbed. There appear to be no other records for north or west Cheshire.

Roosts in maize featured in seven (possibly ten) of the 15 years 1989-2003 at Arclid (Sandbach) and six during that same period at Toft (Knutsford) and they occurred annually at both sites during each of the years 1991 to 1996 inclusive (Table 1). In three of those years a third roost site in maize was recorded in the county and in one year five sites were recorded. During the years 1997-99, flocks of ca 200 mid-Aug; 500+ on 5th Sept and a peak of 750 in Sept were recorded at Arclid (Sandbach) but no obvious regular roosts were found. Similarly, no major roosts were recorded at Toft (Knutsford) after 1996 although in 2002 and 2003 several hundreds were recorded intermittently using maize during Aug-Sept in the adjacent Tabley area to the west of Knutsford.

The acreage in east and south-east Cheshire planted with maize continues to increase. Apart from the two regularly used sites in Cheshire, the records suggest that roosting in maize is a transient phenomenon both within any one autumn and, particularly, from year to year. Also, maize is often grown in different locations from year to year compared with the more "static" nature of traditional reedbed sites. During July-Aug 2003, in the area between Congleton and Macclesfield on the eastern edge of Cheshire and adjacent to the Peak District, Swallows and House Martins were regularly being attracted to maize fields in the late evenings, rather as they were at Arclid between 1997-99 and in the Knutsford/Tabley

area in 2002/03. However, whether this was only for feeding purposes, or whether birds were roosting more diffusely throughout this expanding habitat rather than gathering in large communal roosts is not clear (Steve Barber *pers comm*).

The availability of maize for Swallows to roost in may also be affected by good summers resulting in an early harvest - maize grew rapidly in the Knutsford area in 1995 because of warm, sultry weather and matured earlier than usual in the Sandbach area in 2003 during the prolonged summer.

Unusually, ca 50 Swallows roosted in a field of oats at Toft Hall Farm, Knutsford on 9th July 1995 (Peter Hall *pers. comm.*) and, in a wider context, Brown & Brown (1999) state that Swallows are often found roosting and foraging in sugarcane or other grain fields as well as reedbeds or marshes in the USA.

My thanks go to Steve Barber (Ed. Cheshire Bird Reports 1983-98 and recent East Cheshire sightings), Tony Ford (Arclid, Sandbach), Peter Hall (Toft Hall Farm, Knutsford) and David Norman (north Cheshire) for keeping me informed after having moved to Devon.

References

- Brown, C.R. & Brown M.B.** (1999) Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*) In *The Birds of North America, No 452* (Poole, A & Gill, F, eds), Philidelphia.
- Ford, A.A. & Elphick, D.** (1993) Barn Swallows roosting in maize. *British Birds* 86, 95-96.
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Table 1. Peak counts of Swallows roosting in maize at the two most regularly used sites in Cheshire during the period 1989-2003.

	Arclid (Sandbach)		Toft Hall Farm (Knutsford)	
1991	12 Sept	many 1,000s	24 Aug	ca 250
1992		max 1,000	29 Aug	2,500
1993	17 Sept	several 1,000s	19 Sept	2,000 +
1994	7 Sept	low 1,000s	6 Sept	2,000
1995	late Aug/early Sept	1,000	7 Sept	10,000
1996	late Aug/early Sept	1,000	19 Aug	600

An African tale



Robert Butlin kindly sent me an extract from his report after returning from an Earthwatch project to Mwea National Reserve, Kenya. The project was on Europe-Africa Songbird Migrations, and its primary purpose was to try to ring and take biometric and other data from Palearctic migrants wintering in Africa.

Earthwatch is a charity committed to conservation work throughout the globe. It is primarily a scientific organisation, which wishes to expand the frontiers of knowledge in a wide range of areas.

Mwea National Reserve is situated about 150 kms north-east of Nairobi on the north shore of one of a series of reservoirs formed by damming the Tana and Thiba rivers.

Extract from day seven of the project

Opening the nets we heard what sounded like a roost in the distance. Looking down the hill we could see a reed bed, which seemed to be where the noise was coming from. This was also in the general direction that we'd all been seeing Swallows heading to each and every evening. We decided that we'd all go there on our final evening.

The rains had stimulated termites to emerge, attracting a wide variety of birds to feed on them. This ranged from the acrobatic, and to be expected Barn Swallows, to equally effective Spotted Flycatchers and less effective African Golden Weavers and Slate-coloured Boubous. Seeing the Swallows, including the odd Red-rumped and one Wire-tailed, Hoover up the alates, or flying termites, was most impressive.

I'd known that Mwea had had a huge Swallow roost, but Gabor (Dr Gabor Lövei, principal Researcher) said that it had moved between 2001 and 2002, and that they'd failed to find it in 2002. Our last night was the final chance we'd have to see if the 2003 one could be located. We arrived around 17.30, found the reedbed and more importantly a way in through the bush on to the muddy, but relatively firm bank. The site was at the point where the Tana River flows into the reservoir itself. We had water in front of us for about 20 metres, with a flat grassy bank for a further 30 metres before bushy vegetation took hold. The river curled in to our right, some 30 metres wide as well. The reedbed was the other side of the river. Swallow numbers, and wagtail numbers gradually increased until by 18:00 the wagtails must have numbered 30,000 as they chattered away in the reedbed, occasionally flying off in loose flocks over the water before settling again.

But while wagtail numbers peaked around 18:00 the Swallows just kept coming. We were on the edge of the roost, so looking away and over the reedbed meant looking through the vast throng of birds. With the naked eye it was spectacular, through binoculars the numbers were uncountable, and for me almost unimaginable. We'd truly found the roost, and we could only watch open mouthed as more and more birds came into sight. Those who'd seen locust swarms suggested that this was like a small one. Those like me who'd never seen anything like it stood around in awe as the sky gradually got darker and the bird swooped down into the reeds. We were only disturbed by a single, rather tame Malachite Kingfisher, which very kindly sat still while photographs were taken. Not standing still was the hippo family, which was getting increasingly restless as they saw their way out for food blocked by us. Eventually as the last light faded from the sky we headed back to the Land-Rover and drove to the camp. A truly spectacular end to a wonderful ten days, and without any doubt the best experience of all my birdwatching days.

Robert Butlin

Example: Summary sheet filled in (see p. 8)

Ringling summary sheet

Vegetation (tick)		Year	2003		Ringers/Group		Roost Registration No		Registered Site Code	
x Reed-bed (Phragmites)					Nunnery R G		0003		SAN	
Reed-bed (Arundo)										
Reed-bed and willows										
Other:.....										
***Please give total NEW Swallows ringed & then the total Juvs and adults that were fully processed										
Tape luring										
from										
until										
(hour)										
Number of Swallows RINGED**										
total										
ringed										
Sand-										
Martins										
< 50										
50- >100 (estimate to nearest 100)										
100										
Total length of nets used (m)										
Ringling sessions	Day	Month								
1	9	8	19:30	20:15	80	38	5			100
2	16	8	19:30	20:30	100	44	6			100
3	26	8	20:15	21:00	94	50	4	2		99
4	3	9	20:15	21:00	65	61	4			100
5	11	9	20:00	21:00	40	38	2			100
6										
7										
8										
9										
10										
11										
12										
13										
14										
15										
16										
17										
18										
			Total		379	231	21	2		

* Please estimate the proportion of Swallows (as a percentage) from the total estimated numbers of Swallows and Sand Martins roosting

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More information on the Web at
[www.bto.org/ringing/
swallowroostproject](http://www.bto.org/ringing/swallowroostproject)



Sally Bell

News items

Instructions for inputting Swallow Data in IPMR (V2.1)

Before inputting any Swallow data you need to register the project within IPMR:

- Main Menu 'Captures' select 'Project Registration', fill in your roost registration number under the SRP project listed. Your number consists of four digits in total, eg. 0010.
- When inputting Swallow data select field setup SRP from drop down list under 'Captures', 'Enter Capture details' - List or form style. This has all the required Swallow project fields listed.
- Make sure the field called Proj1 is filled in for every Swallow record ringed as part of the project, regardless of whether the bird was fully processed or not. For example, you may have ringed 150 birds during a roost catch but only manage to take full measurements on 100 of these. All 150 birds should be flagged with your SRP number. Once filled in for the first record (eg. SRP:0010), double click on it so it turns yellow and the code will copy down for the other Swallow records input.

It is very important that you follow the above instructions and make sure the Proj1 field is filled in for every Swallow ringed, controlled or retrapped during the roost catches. All data and information for working out refunds is extracted from the ORACLE database at BTO using the Proj1 field.

RETRAPS & CONTROLS

The Ringing Summary Sheet that you fill in at the end of the season should only have totals in for all birds **newly ringed**, and then broken down for all adults and juveniles **ringed** that were also fully processed. I have altered the wording on the Ringing Summary Sheet, which I hope will make things clearer. There is also an example of a filled out sheet on p7. The ringer here has included all birds caught and ringed during the roost catch in 'Total ringed' column and then the total from this that were also fully processed. So the totals in the '1st year' and 'Adult' columns may not always add up to the 'Total ringed'. I have noted that many of you are also including retraps and controls in the totals on this sheet. These birds should not be included on this sheet but should be flagged with your SRP registration number (eg SRP:0001) (see previous item). If you are unsure whether past data for retraps & controls were flagged then please let me know and I can update the records this end.

Bridget Griffin

Illustrations by Sally Bell are taken from *Rusty Flies South* by G.F. Appleton. Copies are still available for £5 from BTO HQ and they make ideal presents for young children.