

# Swift migration

## Title

Swift Migration Enquiry 1947-1950

## Description and Summary of Results

Between 1935 and 1939 the Devon Birdwatching and Preservation Society organised five watches for migrant Swifts *Apus apus* in SW England. These indicated that migrating birds could be seen easily and that a wider scale watch was warranted to try to find out the patterns of movements within Britain during the period of their arrival for the summer. It was decided to organise a watch on one day. The choice of 11 May in 1947 was just right in that it recorded many of a peak wave of birds which arrived in Britain on 8 May and was passing through the country. A total of around 5000 birds was recorded by around 500 observers of which about a third sent in a nil return. There was a clear predominance of northward movements recorded from all the country north of a line from the Wash to the Severn but directions were more variable to the south of this. There were very light winds on the day and largely clear skies.

In 1948 (on 9 May) 368 observers sent in records totalling about 3000 birds of which two-thirds were flying predominantly north although there were more to the northeast than the previous year. In 1949 and 1950 counts over a 2-3 week period covering the arrival period to about the middle of May were requested. About 7000 birds were recorded in 1949 with a 12:1 dominance of birds flying north than south. In 1950 the total was 21800 birds (also about a 12:1 northerly to southerly flying) and another 20000 or so birds were noted later in the year, mainly from a few coastal watching points.

Overall birds seemed to travel predominantly north with arrivals in SW England 2-3 days earlier than in SE England. The late arrival and of rather few birds overall on the east coast suggested that all birds coming in to Britain were birds intending to breed in Britain rather than carry on further north or east. Birds also continued to show movements which appeared to be migration all through the breeding season. These were presumed to be non-breeders – apparently not tied to particular locations – and simply moving around to find suitable feeding areas. Some of these, but certainly not all, were around weather systems. It was thought possible that the Swift population in Britain was sometimes reinforced in mid-season by an influx from the Continent.

Emigration was in full swing at the end of July and in early August. Large movements continued in 1950 in mid and late August. These were so late that they were suspected of being passage movements through Britain from countries further north. During the whole of August 1950 almost none were reported with any northerly component to the direction of flight – the main direction being south or southwest.

## Methods of Data Capture

The intention in the first two years was to obtain as many reports as possible on one day hoping to see indications of any substantial movements taking place, although it was thought unlikely that it would be possible to identify the same birds passing more than one

observer. Observers were asked to note the time, place, flight direction (and describing them as circling or drifting) and to estimate the number of Swifts seen. Observers were encouraged to send in negative returns. Also observers were asked to note the direction of any wind, the type of weather and to provide a rough sketchmap of the site.

### **Purpose of Data Capture**

To determine the pattern of arrival and spread of the Swift through Britain in the spring, with a specific primary object to ascertain the main directions taken by Swifts observed on migration throughout the country on a particular day. This aimed to find any influence of climatic and other factors on their course.

### **Geographic Coverage**

All of Britain.

### **Temporal Coverage**

The spring of each of 1947-1950. One day only was selected in the first two years: 11 May 1947 and 9 May 1948. In the other two years records were accepted from the Swift's arrival in mid-late April until 16 May (1949) and 15 May (1950). In 1950 records were sent in from all through the summer period in addition.

### **Other Interested parties**

The survey was organised and run by the BTO and was publicised through its various channels and various other sources.

### **Organiser(s)**

H G Hurrell

### **Current Staff Contact**

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### **Publications**

The main reports which summarised the migration of Swifts in Britain and which included the results of the simultaneous watches run by BTO are:

Hurrell, H.G. 1948. Simultaneous watch for migrant Swifts, May 11th 1947. *British Birds* 41: 138-145;

Hurrell, H.G. 1951. The movements of Swifts in summer. *British Birds* 44: 146-152.

Requests for information and brief reports are included in *BTO Annual Reports* numbers 14, 15, 16, 17 and 18; and *BTO Bulletin* numbers 25, 28, 29, 32, 33, 35, 37, 38 and 41.

**Available from NBN?**

No.

**Computer data -- location**

None.

**Computer data -- outline contents**

N/A.

**Computer data -- description of contents**

N/A.

**Information held in BTO Archives**

3 Archive Boxes containing a bundle of letters and forms for each year of the survey and some miscellaneous letters and other material. Copies of the Meteorological Office weather maps for the relevant periods are included.

**Notes on Access and Use****Other information****Notes on Survey Design****Specific Issues for Analysis**