

2001 SECOS SWIFT SURVEY

Arriving late from their winter quarters, it is usually May before they are here in any great numbers, and they have mainly returned to southern Africa by the end of August. Whilst here they breed in inaccessible places and are very mobile. No wonder that the Swift *Apus apus* is a species that is not often surveyed.

However, in 1995 a survey was organised to try to determine the numbers of Swifts throughout Cheshire. Due to bad weather in June of that year the survey had to be completed in 1996. The results were duly published and gave a population in the SECOS area of 1479 pairs. The survey also formally recognised the existence of a colony in the west end of Crewe, which with a population of around 450 pairs, was amongst the largest in Britain. Because of this colony of Swifts the six streets in the area have been designated as a Site of Biological Importance, one of only two urban SBIs in Cheshire.

During the following years several members commented that the numbers of Swifts seemed to have declined and we decided to organise a follow-up survey covering the SECOS area. This was duly organised for 2001 using the same guidelines as the 1995/6 survey i.e.

- count screaming birds at colony sites
- only count in good weather (warm, little wind and no rain)
- only count after 9-00pm

This should enable the results of the two surveys to be directly comparable.

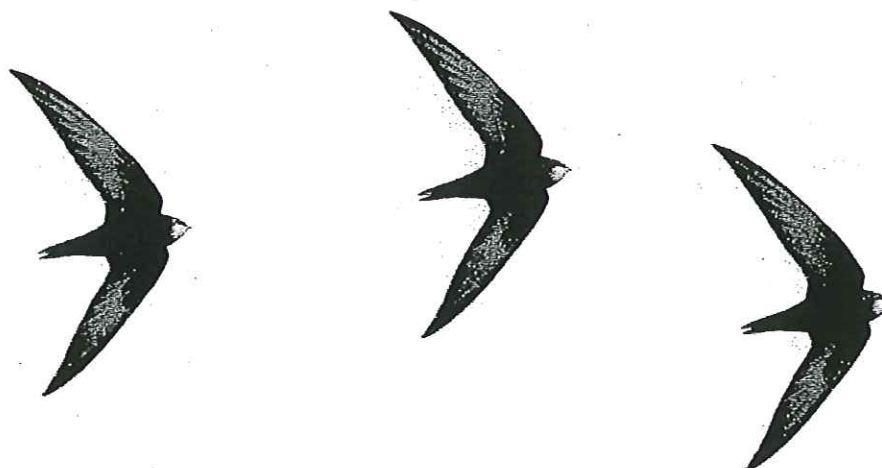
The survey was completed during the first three weeks of June as planned. This is considered to be the best time for such a survey since at this time one of each breeding pair should be out of sight sitting on eggs and no young would be free-flying. Each bird therefore should represent a pair. However, Swifts do not breed until two or three years old but some non-breeders return to their natal colony and may be in the screaming parties! This is now getting complicated and it is better to ignore these birds for comparison purposes!

18 intrepid members took part in the survey, walking the streets of towns and villages just as it was going dark, looking up at the eaves of houses and trying hard to make it obvious that they were not staring into bedrooms!

The results of the survey are given in Table 1.

It is immediately obvious that the numbers of Swifts have indeed gone down, and quite dramatically so, with an overall reduction of 38%. The supercolony in the west end of Crewe has had a massive reduction from 450 in 1995 to only 120 in 2001. More worrying is the fact that the reduction in numbers is spread across the whole area with virtually every colony showing some reduction. This means that the reduction is not due to local difficulties, such as building works restricting access to nesting sites under the eaves of houses, but some other unknown cause.

Colin Lythgoe



LOCALITY	STREET	MAX NO. OF BIRDS	MAX IN 1995/6	DIFFERENCE
Alsager	5 sites	22	36	-14
Basford	Larch Avenue	10	25	-15
Congleton	everywhere	212	248	-36
Crewe Central	Alton Street	80	50	+30
Crewe North East	3 sites	29	45	-16
Crewe North West	4 sites	55	97	-42
Crewe South West	9 sites	166	158	+8
Crewe West	West end	120	450	-330
Elworth	School Lane	15	18	-3
Elworth	Marsh Green Road	2	3	-1
Haslington	Cartwright Road	35	90	-55
Holmes Chapel	London Road	5	0	+5
Holmes Chapel	Macclesfield Road	0	12	-12
Middlewich	everywhere	130	142	-12
Sandbach	Town centre	20	22	-2
Scholar Green	Drenfell Road	0	6	-6
Wheelock Heath	Sandy Lane	7	31	-24
Willaston	Wistaston Road	0	16	-16
Wistaston	Church Lane	12	30	-18
TOTAL IN 2001		920		
TOTAL IN 1995/6		1479		

PERCENTAGE REDUCTION

38%

2001 SECOS Swift Survey Table 1