

Saving Usk's Swifts

by Mark Mogford

Having always had a fascination, even obsession, with Swifts, when I moved to Usk several years ago I set about finding how I could help with their plight. They're in steep decline – numbers have plummeted by 58% in the last ten years and one of the causes of this is thought to be the lack of nest sites in modern buildings.

I subsequently discovered that a survey of nesting birds had been conducted in Usk in 2014 by GOS members Verity Picken, Chris Field and others but as no further surveys had been undertaken, I made the decision to do all I could for these marvellous birds.

I knew that the best way forward would be to engage with the community, with the emphasis on education and awareness, and give people an opportunity to help the cause.

Verity and I produced a concise and informative flyer inviting anyone who cared to come to join us on 'Swift walks' round Usk; we gave two dates, a time (8pm) and a meeting point. Both walks were extremely successful with around 20 people attending on each date, including some very enthusiastic children, whose knowledge of Swifts astounded me. I gave a short talk about the incredible life of a Swift before we set off round town.

The objective of the walks was not only to locate active nests and establish approximate numbers of birds within Usk, but also to ascertain the suitability of any buildings which weren't currently being used for nesting for hosting nest boxes. We confirmed that many of the nest sites discovered in 2014 were still in use, and also found quite a few new sites. So far this summer we've located roughly 20 nest sites, some of which held several nests.

Many of those who participated in the walks have spread the word about the plight of Swifts among friends and neighbours and there's a growing list of people eager to help by putting boxes with callers on their houses. GOS sees this as a pilot/case study which could possibly apply more widely across Gwent in future years so has offered financial support to the project.

With the breeding season soon coming to an end and the birds returning to Africa, our priority this autumn and winter will be installing nest boxes on suitable buildings ready for the arrival of the birds next May.





This model Swift was made to the exact size and weight