

Highland Swift Survey 2006 **SUMMARY REPORT**

Introduction:

The Common Swift (*Apus apus*) is a summer breeding migrant to Britain, usually arriving in the country at the beginning of May from its wintering grounds in sub-Saharan Africa, and departing again in August. Due to the wide-ranging nature and discreet nesting behaviour of this species, abundance estimates are difficult. The U.K. population was estimated at 85,000 pairs in 1990 (Baker *et al.*, 2006), and between 20,000 and 100,000 pairs in the year 2000 (BirdLife International, 2004).

Despite some uncertainty of population size, there is evidence that Swift numbers in the U.K. and other parts of the Swift's European breeding range have declined over recent years (e.g. Baillie *et al.*, 2005; BirdLife International, 2004). In Scotland, the British Trust for Ornithology recorded a 62% decline in the Scottish Swift population between 1994 and 2003 (Baillie *et al.*, 2005).

Such declines are thought to be primarily due to a lack of suitable breeding sites for this bird. Although originally cliff or tree-hole nesters, Swifts now nest almost exclusively in buildings. Individuals are believed to return to the same nesting locations every year, depending on small outside holes in roofs or walls to access larger inner cavities in which to breed (Gibbons *et al.*, 1993). However, with changes in building methods and the renovation and demolition of many old structures, this is a resource that is becoming increasingly limited in the modern age. As a result of the observed declines and the alleged main cause, a number of Swift conservation projects throughout Europe have been initiated.

Aims:

Due to the lack of information on Swift nesting locations in the Highlands, the Highland Swift Survey 2006 was carried out in an attempt to identify the important breeding areas in the region. Given that Swifts exhibit site-fidelity with respect to nesting locations, the aim for the future is to protect and promote these locations as Swift breeding sites.

Method:

Requests for Swift sighting records were made to members of the public and various birding and conservation organisations throughout the Highlands & Islands during June, July and August. Appeal methods involved the use of e-mails, websites, press releases, letters to the press, and one radio broadcast. The requested information included date of observation, location, observed behaviour (e.g. displaying typical low-flying 'screaming' behaviour of near-by nesters/feeding etc), number of nest sites, and first and last Swift observation dates this season. A telephone number, postal address, and email address to which survey information could be reported, were provided. Assistance with the identification of Swifts and their nest sites was made available.

For the purpose of this report, results from the survey, including 12 nest sites recorded in 2005, were sorted by town or other distinct location and amalgamated into a single alphabetical list, indicating the number of nest sites and peak number of displaying birds recorded for each location (excluding records of feeding or high-flying birds). The number of different record sources for each location has also been listed.

A similar Swift nest survey was carried out in the Cairngorms in 2005 as part of the Cairngorms Local Biodiversity Action Plan. Swift nest data recorded from the Highland region by this survey have been included in the results summarised herein.

Results:

Overall, a total of 137 records (including flying/feeding sightings) were reported to the 2006 Highland Swift survey for 48 distinct Highland towns/areas. From these records, a total of 115 individual Swift nest sites were located in 45 distinct towns/locations. The peak numbers of displaying birds and numbers of nest sites identified for each town/location, including the 61 nest sites recorded in the Highlands by the Cairngorm 2005 Swift Nest Survey are summarised (table 1 & figure 1).

The majority of sightings of Swifts displaying 'screaming behaviour' or flying low over buildings were recorded in several built-up areas in the southeast area of the Highlands (figure 1). The most easterly displaying or nesting Swifts were recorded in Wick, the most westerly in Fort William and the most northerly in Lybster with no reports of breeding Swifts in the islands. The highest numbers of nesting pairs were recorded in Fort William and Grantown-on-spey (35 and 34 respectively). At least 8

nest sites were also recorded in Auldearn, Aviemore, Beauly, Fort Augustus and Inverness. The highest peak numbers of displaying birds outside these locations were recorded in Cannich (20), Dingwall (20), and Thurso (24).

The earliest Swift observation date reported in 2006 was 4th May (Golspie and Inverness), and the latest was on 17th August (Thurso).

Table 1: Summary of results from the 2006 Highland Swift survey, including 12 nest sites that were recorded in 2005 and 61 from the Cairngorms 2005 Swift Nest Survey.

<i>Location</i>	<i>Peak no. displaying birds</i>	<i>Confirmed no. nesting pairs</i>	<i>No. record sources</i>
Aberchalder	8	*	1
Abernethy	*	2	2
Achnagallin	10	2	1
Aigas Field Centre	8	1	2
Auldearn	60	10	1
Aviemore	12	10	5
Balnain	11	*	1
Beauly	6	10	3
Boat of Garten	8	5	6
Bonar Bridge	12	1	2
Cannich	20	3	1
Carrbridge	6	3	1
Cawdor	6	*	1
Contin	3	*	1
Cromarty	13	2	2
Cromdale	3	1	2
Dalwhinnie	30	6	2
Dingwall	20	*	3
Drumnadrochit	6	2	2
Dulnain Bridge	1	*	1
Evanton	10	*	1
Fort Augustus	24	14	2
Fort William	60	35	6
Garve	20	4	1
Glenmoriston	13	1	1
Golspie	10	*	2
Grantown-on-spey	20	34	15
Gruids	3	*	1
Halkirk	4	3	3
Inverness	30	8	11
Kilcoy	*	1	1
Kincraig	2	1	2
Kingussie	*	2	3
Lybster	8	*	1
Marybank	*	2	1
Maryburgh	2	*	1
Moy	9	*	1
Nairn	15	*	1
Nethy Bridge	15	7	3
Newtonmore	10	2	1
Tain	10	*	1
Thurso	24	4	5
Tomatin	10	*	1
Torlundy	10	*	1
Wick	10	*	1

* indicates no data recorded

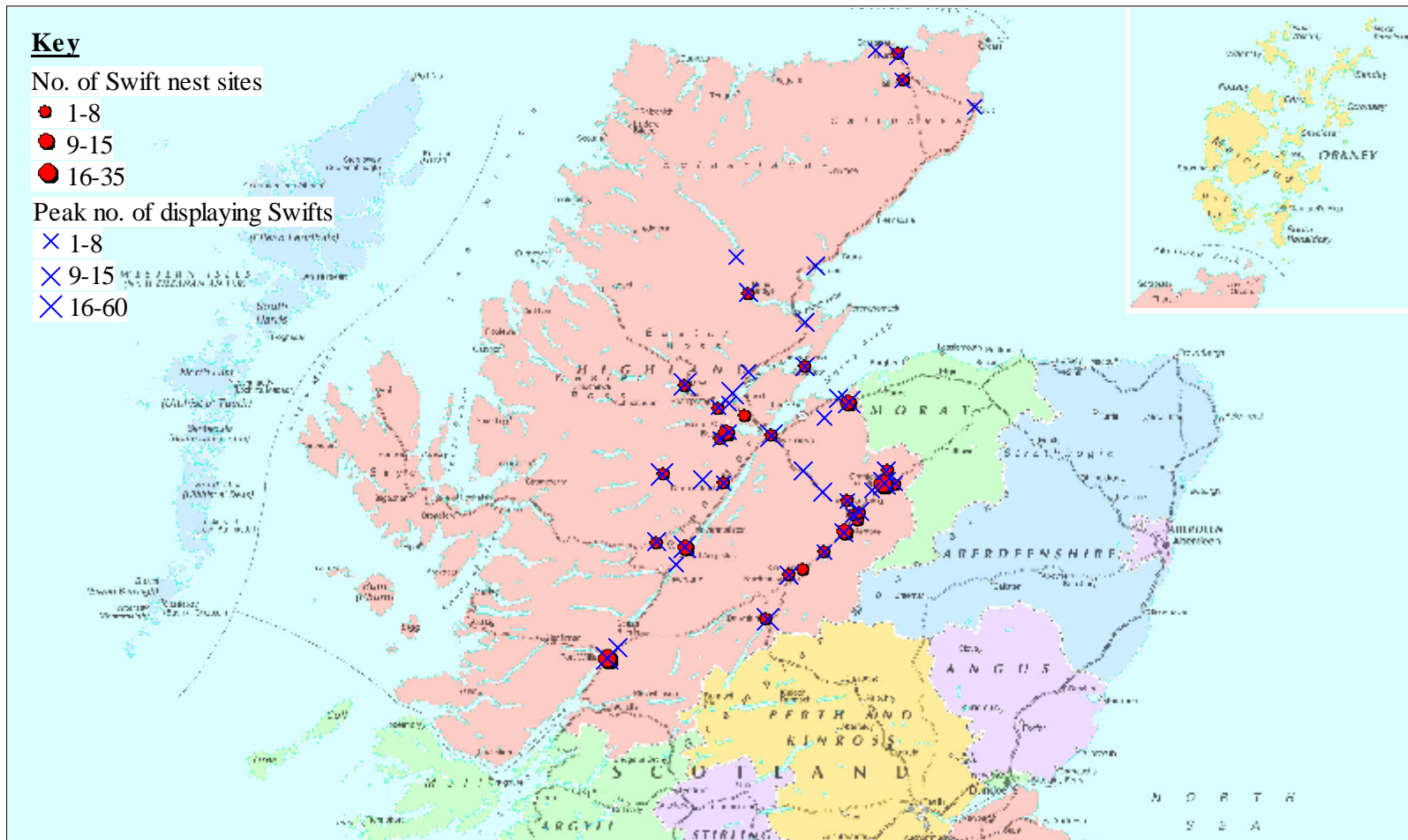


Figure 1: Locations of Swift nest sites and displaying Swifts recorded in the Highland Swift Survey 2006.

This data includes 61 nest sites recorded in 2005 by the Cairngorms Swift Nest Survey.

Discussion:

Although data collected as a result of the Highland Swift Survey could not provide any indication of the size of the Highland Swift population, it is clear that Swifts in the Highlands are nesting in, or have been seen displaying characteristic nesting behaviour primarily near built-up areas. According to the nest records received, Auldearn, Aviemore, Beauly, Fort Augustus, Fort William, Grantown-on-spey, and Inverness currently accommodate the majority of breeding Swifts in the Highlands with 8 to 35 pairs each (table 1).

According to peak numbers of displaying Swifts recorded (table 1 & figure 1), several other Highland towns are also potentially important breeding areas (e.g. Thurso). However, as these counts were recorded at varying times throughout the breeding season, they are not necessarily indicative of the number of breeding adults at a location, as juveniles may also have been present. Furthermore, it is also unlikely all Swifts breeding in one area were sighted all displaying simultaneously and it should be noted that counts are not necessarily comparable between locations.

Similarly, it cannot be discerned whether other Highland settlements for which no sightings were recorded actually lack nesting Swifts, or whether these colonies were simply not recorded. Further surveying with a more systematic approach would therefore be required to provide more reliable estimates of Swift breeding numbers and locations in the Highlands. This survey has nevertheless highlighted likely key Swift breeding areas in this region of Scotland.

To help ensure Swifts continue to return to the Highlands to breed, the protection and promotion of Swift breeding sites in the regional 'hot spots' identified in this report should therefore be carried out. This would primarily involve awareness-raising exercises targeting homeowners, builders and architects in the local vicinity of these Swift-nesting areas, to ensure building renovations and new builds do not adversely affect these birds, but instead conserve their nesting habitat.

Other factors believed to influence Swift distribution, breeding-success, and abundance include climatic variations and food availability (Rajchard *et al.*, 2006). The fact that these environmental aspects are harder for communities to address in a direct way further highlights the need to conserve Swift nest-sites where possible, and thereby minimise the impact of compounding negative effects.

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