



Am I seeing the collapse of the Swift population in Glasgow?

C. DARLASTON

Plate 300. Swift. © Ian Foulton

Ten years ago, I used to walk through streets in parts of Glasgow in summer and see and hear screaming parties of Swifts displaying around the buildings until nearly dark (after 11 p.m. in June). It was never as exciting as, for example, Castle Douglas, where the buildings are lower and the Swifts scream down the street at knee level, but it was the ever-present sound of their calls on fine summer evenings that alerted me to their presence and their thrilling chases around the buildings. Now, I wish I had paid more attention to recording numbers, as year on year they have become fewer, even in areas not badly affected by renovation (e.g. Battlefield and Hillhead). My focus was and still is location and conservation of nesting areas.

In the early days of searching, Swifts were found around the older buildings in the west end of the city, mainly south of Great Western Road and Kelvindale and around Queens Park - especially in Battlefield and Pollockshields. In the east of the city they were in Dennistoun and Tollcross. In these locations I generally recorded screaming parties of between 10 and 20.

The greater excitement was finding larger colonies in Milton, Barmulloch, Ruchazie, Garthamlock, Easterhouse, Wellhouse, Barlanark,



Plate 301. Dougrie Drive, Castlemilk. © Clare Darlaston



Plate 302. Gable close-up; nest sites are unnoticeable till you see a Swift go in. © Clare Darlaston

Castlemilk, and Drumchapel. These are the so-called 'peripheral estates' where many of the buildings date from the 1940s and 1950s and the era of slum clearance. Most larger Scottish cities have this style of building. Not only did cracks and gaps in the concrete lintels on these post-war houses provide nest sites for them, but the proximity to the urban fringe of trees and fields must make feeding easier. Screaming parties were generally from six to 30. Some nest sites were recorded, but exactly how many nest sites there were it was never possible to ascertain; the number in a screaming party may vary from 30 to six from moment to moment and is no indication of the number of nesting pairs

As a generalisation, in the early days of Swift survey (2000 onwards) core areas would have screaming parties of up to 30 birds. There were areas where smaller numbers were recorded, e.g. Maryhill, but I have not recently seen birds in most of those, but nor have I searched extensively.

For the three years 2010–12 we had cold wet summers, and Swift surveying was difficult, for the birds only party in fine weather. The summer of 2012 was a breeding failure for many areas, with Swifts giving up and leaving as early as mid-July.

At the same time renovation had been proceeding at a fast rate throughout the peripheral estates. Whole areas have been covered in scaffolding, while the lovely crumbling concrete eaves are clad with PVC soffits, confusing and excluding the birds.

In summer 2011 I toured three of the previous 'Swift priority areas' - Castlemilk, Barmulloch and Lochfield. In these areas recent extensive renovation of the houses had removed the old nest sites. The Housing Associations (under GHA's umbrella) had willingly created new nest sites by various methods, but these had not been 'found' by the birds and there was a horrible silence over the streets that used to be the hub of screaming parties of up to 30 birds.

Plates 303–305 right. (top) Before renovation with Swifts nesting. **(middle)** After renovation, nest sites lost. **(bottom)** Box site provided by GHA. © All by Clare Darlston

This summer, 2013, the weather was better, so I decided to make an effort to look at as many as possible of these priority areas. The results of my searches, compared with previous surveys, were no more encouraging. In Barmulloch the most I saw was six Swifts, in Milton four (but in a different location from previously), in Castlemilk four and in Barlanark four.





Plate 306. A hole cut in to the PVC soffit on the gable now provides a better design. © Clare Darlaston

In the peripheral estates, none of the new sites have been adopted. The few remaining sites I found were in buildings that had not been renovated. Thus there remain, to my knowledge, two or three nest sites in Castlemilk, one (possibly two) in Barmulloch and maybe two in Lochend. In Drumchapel, where, due to 'right to buy', not all buildings were renovated, I did not see any Swifts there over two visits this summer on fine evenings. Nest sites in one half of Barlanark have been lost to demolition, as have many other sites in the east end. Some sites remain in neighbouring unrenovated properties, but observable birds were down to half a dozen.

In the older tenement areas, I have seen no Swifts around Hillhead recently, though there is still a smaller colony in Hyndland. On two visits to Battlefield Avenue, I saw none. Between loss of nest sites and awful weather, it is now hard to find Swifts in Glasgow.

It is clear that unless at least some nest sites can be retained during renovation of a scheme, the birds will leave the area entirely, and the chances of them ever returning are, I believe, non-existent. My hope is that if it is possible to retain one or two of the original sites for long enough (but I do not know how long is long enough), Swifts may eventually recolonise using the new nest sites.

One of the big unanswered questions is - what happens to the dispossessed Swifts? There is no evidence of new colonies in Glasgow, only a potentially catastrophic decline in numbers.

*Clare Darlaston,
Concern for Swifts (Scotland)
Email: swiftscot@yahoo.co.uk
Tel: 07900 637 452*