

## Swallow study at Alfrick, Worcestershire, 2017 – the twentieth year.

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2017 was the twentieth year since starting this scheme to monitor the ups and downs of these well loved birds in our villages of Alfrick and Leigh.

A few birds got going quickly and six pairs had eggs by the latter part of April and the chicks were all ringed before May was out but only one had the usual clutch of five eggs, with one only having two. A further eleven broods had been ringed by the end of June, and in 2016 it was similar with 14. What was very different was the number of chicks with 64 last year and only 44 this June.

Most of the catching of the adults is done by waiting for them to return to feed the chicks and then catch them in a hand held net over the entrance. This is the tedious bit as their return is erratic and now and then I am fooled as in one case where I waited patiently for 25 minutes only to find when I went to ring the chicks she had been sitting on the nest all that time! Her partner was an interesting bird carrying one of my rings from August 2011 making him a seven year old that I had now handled five times, so he now has a lot of miles under his belt! The longevity record for this species is eleven years.

Other captures of note was a chick from last year ringed near the old Swan Inn and had returned as a male finding a mate to nest halfway down Sandlin Lane in some stables along with seven other pairs, so a very busy site. Another bird here was also ringed as a chick only a few hundred yards away over the road, and also turned out to be a male, and from the records was last handled in 2013. It is mainly the males that return to the district with the females going further afield.

The very hot weather in July severely tested those broods that were situated immediately under roofs that became extremely hot and some chicks did perish. Just a few were feathered enough to flutter down to the floor and were replaced by observant owners and other people using the stables. One poor swallow at one stable tried three times for a third brood and had to abandon two nests with five eggs each before settling on four eggs on 5th Aug but in much cooler conditions.

Every year brings surprises! I was about to ring some chicks at one site when the owners old cocker bitch suddenly appeared and dropped a swallow chick at our feet! There was no indication where she had found it but she had got the message! It was perfectly okay as the dog was soft-mouthed so it was just a bit damp and cool and was a bit older than the other chicks. It was ringed and put back with the ones just handled in the hope it would be adopted, which appeared to be the case as on a later visit they all appeared fully feathered and sat near the nest.

Another odd incident happened when I was doing a late visit to some stables in Sandlin and noticed a bird was twittering in a stable. This usually happens when pairs are setting up a site so it seemed a bit odd being late August. I caught one bird that was a female I had previously ringed some months ago, then noticed a few minutes later another bird fly in so I caught that one expecting it to be her mate but no it was the same female! Again a little while later yet another one flew in so I caught it again out of curiosity really and sure enough the same female!! This raised lots of unanswerable questions, what was it planning so late in the season and was this a dumb swallow that was unable to learn a net over the door means trouble?

At the same site I had also found one nest in a stable with a sitting bird on three eggs, and as this was the 28<sup>th</sup> August it seemed quite late, but three hatched and ringed on 7<sup>th</sup> September with another ten to fourteen days before they fledged!

The overall season was mixed, 61 adults were caught with 15 of

those birds already ringed giving a low average of 24% completing another arduous round trip to return. The productivity was much reduced for various reasons one being the very hot spells and also smaller clutches being laid. A total of only 164 chicks were ringed, one of the lowest in 20 years, plus another 93 recorded but not able to be ringed due to inaccessibility of sites and deaths. The number of pairs monitored was 42, five up on last year, but a similar sum to previous years.

Finally I must gratefully thank all the site owners for their patience in my constant visits and the many “cuppas” and conversations we have had.