

BIRDWATCHING

Report by Andrew Lapworth

We didn't have our usual outing this month; instead 4 of us made a late evening visit up to The Stang hoping to see and hear **Nightjars**. Unfortunately the evening was cold and breezy and we only heard the merest snatches of their churring song and we didn't see even one. Better luck next year, possibly at a different and more reliable site.

Swifts. We are fortunate in Barney to still have Swifts visiting and breeding during the summer; many of us delight in seeing and hearing screaming parties of Swifts over the town, especially over the Bank and along Thorngate. Swifts spend their life almost entirely on the wing and even feed, sleep and mate in flight. They feed exclusively on insects and only come to land when nesting. They are only with us from May to early August.

Many of you will know there has been a significant decline in their populations. The reasons for these losses are likely to include poor summer weather, a decline in their insect food and continued loss of suitable nesting sites. Many decaying historic buildings, quite often sites for nesting Swifts, have been restored. Demolition of old buildings is also a cause of nest site loss; the replacement buildings invariably exclude Swifts. Old factories and warehouses have been converted into apartments and offices, and they too were often prime Swift nesting sites. These old buildings are always refurbished or rebuilt to modern standards, with sealed roofs and walls, and no space left for Swifts. Most of the UK's arable land is sprayed with insecticides. Some crops such as oil-seed rape can be sprayed over 20 times per crop. Populations of insects are declining very fast as a result. Perhaps here in Barney we are fortunate to still have insect clouds over the Tees where the birds often feed, along with House Martins and Swallows.

One way to help our Swifts is to provide suitable alternative nesting sites. We have a local Swift champion, Ian Graystone. Ian has built and installed boxes on and around his home in Woodlands and has had success in establishing a local colony there; he is keen to ensure any new Swifts can find new homes nearby. This year he has built and fitted Swift nest boxes for our house in Raby Avenue. We've not had any luck in attracting Swifts into our boxes this year, despite playing Swift calls using a small specially made loudspeaker; but we have had some flying-by, very close, investigating the calls. Maybe next year they will come and use our boxes.

If any U3a members are interested in Swift boxes, do contact me and I will pass on details to Ian.

