AXMOUTH'S HOUSE MARTINS, SWALLOWS AND SWIFTS
A survey – summer 2013

David Simpson and Crescy Cannan

Why a survey?

None of these birds have been faring well, their declining numbers reflected in the RSPB's amber status. Because of this concern, we decided to check out the situation in Axmouth, a small village of some 170 houses in East Devon**.** David is now a local resident, but some years ago he was involved in a similar survey in a rural town in Wiltshire. Crescy, a parish councillor, wanted to know whether these birds are also in decline in our village and whether we can do anything to prevent this continuing.

We walked around Axmouth a number of times, noting the visible swallow, house martin and swift nests on or in buildings. We mentioned what we doing in the parish magazine and at the village show. We talked to local householders some of whom expressed a great interest in the birds and who carefully observed the progress of the birds nesting in or on their and neighbouring properties.

It was a start, providing a baseline count against which, it will be possible in subsequent years to see whether numbers are going up or down. It also provided some clues to the hazards these birds face and the factors that make for successful breeding.

Results

28 nesting sites in the village were identified, including artificial, old and damaged nests.
5 artificial nests were counted, of which 1 was used by house martins, with 1 brood.
By species these sites were**:**

House martin	20
Swallow	7
Swift	1

Estimate of active nests: 37
It was difficult accurately to count house martin and swallow active nests where these were inside, or behind buildings, however estimating from bird activity and residents' reports, the total breakdown was:

House martin	19
Swallow	15
Swift	3

Of the house martins, several reared 3 broods as did the swifts.

Observations

The majority of these birds nesting in Axmouth are house martins. They had to contend with predation by seagulls, nests collapsing, and human removal of nests for 'cleaning'. Other people had successfully helped vulnerable nests with supports under gables. Some residents wondered whether the decline in dairy farming meant the mud used for nest-building lacked the adhesive qualities of dung, though the many successful house martin nests of local mud, and the quick repairs by the birds following damage, suggests that this may not be a problem. The house martins may be having problems with plastic soffits when these replace wooden soffits on their habitual sites – this needs further investigation. The birds used a range of buildings, some old, others mid-20th century housing, but there was a clear preference for gable ends and window apertures.

The swallows have bred well, concentrated in a small number of sites with open sheds, stables or barns. The decline in these kinds of buildings may threaten their future.

Only one swift site exists (a cottage roof space with 3 nests) but larger numbers of swifts joined flying parties with estimates of 25 swifts observed. It might be therefore be possible to increase Axmouth's population, for instance by installing swift boxes in the church tower and by ensuring that future construction or renovation of buildings include swift-bricks and accessible spaces under roofs.

Encouragingly large gatherings (by comparison to previous years) of house martins and swallows on telegraph wires and flying over the village were observed, 120-130 were estimated on several occasions.

The proximity of Axmouth to the marshes with their supply of insects and mud is attractive to all these birds. They also regularly fly in groups over the fields in the centre of the village above Stepps Cross, perhaps drawn by the insects emerging from the fields, woodland trees and the local brook with its muddy seepages in the village show field. The telegraph wires in this area are regular gathering places.

This 2013 survey will form the basis for closer observation in 2014. But what we are most keen to do is to make sure that we use the information gleaned to take positive steps to assist the birds regain their former numbers.