

# Inspiring plea to end swift decline

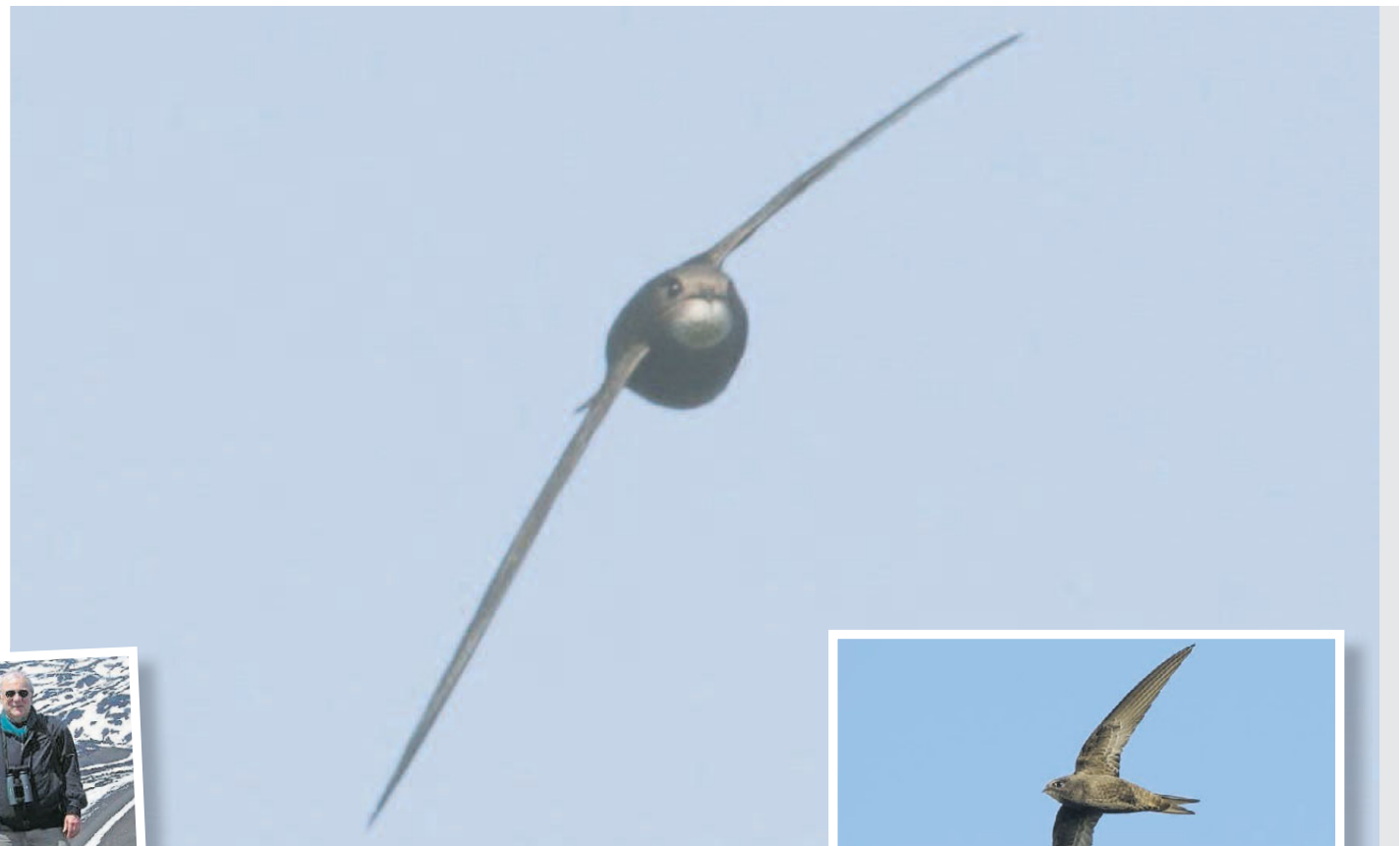
To conclude eaenvironment's coverage of the recent East Anglian biodiversity seminar, **JOHN GRANT** reports on a tour de force for a struggling bird, and hears a message of hope for wildlife on solar farms

**E**dward Mayer doesn't just talk up swifts - he positively fizzes with enthusiasm for them. His fast delivery emphasises his passion for them. His machine-gun salvos of swift facts and pleas for them to be helped in any number of entirely feasible, easy and practical ways seem to emulate the darting, aerobic and rocket-fast flights above our towns and cities that are among the highlights of a British summer.

So engaging and attention-grabbing was his style that delegates at the biodiversity seminar in Bury St Edmunds to whom he spoke may not have noticed the design detail of the shirt he was wearing. It was covered in swift silhouettes. That, in the unlikely scenario of further proof being needed, proved beyond all doubt the extraordinarily close affinity Mr Mayer has with the species.

No one has done more to halt the alarming decline swifts have suffered in recent years. Ours may be more properly known as common swifts - there being many other species in the swift family around the world - but they are far from being as common as they once were.

Mr Mayer began his swift presentation to planners and ecologists attending the seminar - hosted by St Edmundsbury Borough Council and organised by Suffolk and Norfolk's biodiversity partnerships - with quite a eulogy.



■ Main photo, a common swift approaches head-on in typically dramatic flight. Left, Edward Mayer, founder of Swift Conservation, and, right, a common swift glides effortlessly through the air.

Photos: ANDREW EASTON/CONTRIBUTED/OSCAR DEWHURST



“They can survive in the centres of the most polluted cities,” he said. “They have unique breeding and feeding strategies. Our lives are brightened up by them. They bring a new dimension to our architectural environment. Each one can catch 20,000 insects a day - how long does it take you to swat a bluebottle? That is how agile they are - and they never land, except to breed. They even mate in mid-air. In terms of aerodynamics they are right up there with the F-16 fighter.”

They were long-lived and faithful to their nest sites and to their mates and yet their migratory journeys took them on an Africa odyssey each

year that was estimated in a “notional” way to involve at least 14,000 miles of flying - “but could quite easily be ten times that,” he said.

Impressive as their vital statistics might be, swifts were “in trouble”, however. “Our swift population has dropped by a half in the last 20 years and they are decreasing every year by 3% because of the loss of their nest places,” said Mr Mayer.

New-style roofing excluded potential swift nest sites in buildings. “We are obsessed with getting all life out of our lives and with being so squeaky clean - and all of this is so sad,” he said. “There is no need for all this ‘let’s kill off’ wildlife’ stuff while we all just watch our TVs and

our smartphones for ever more. We are just wiping everything else out either thoughtlessly, indifferently or intentionally.”

However, Mr Mayer made it clear that it didn't have to be this way. He outlined many of the ways swift nesting sites could be easily provided on new and existing buildings, such as by the use of special bricks that featured cavities in which the birds could breed.

“There are very many easy-to-apply external fittings with lots of designs available and there are internal nest boxes that can be fitted behind access holes or boxes fitted into insulated walls,” he said.

“Swifts have been around for about 49million years and we have

been around for about 3,000 - we do not need to clear their nests away from us.”

Mr Mayer, of Cambridgeshire, is founder of Swift Conservation - a movement dedicated to saving the species. His work has inspired many people in Suffolk and there is now a groundswell of action being taken on behalf of swifts across the county - including campaigns by the Suffolk Ornithologists' Group with Suffolk Wildlife Trust, and more local initiatives such as the one being undertaken by the RSPB's Woodbridge Local Group.

■ Swift Conservation offers a wealth of information on how the species can be helped. Its website address is [www.swift-conservation.org/](http://www.swift-conservation.org/)

## Rays of hope for wildlife shine through as planning conditions and partnership reap early rewards

Suffolk Wildlife Trust's senior conservation adviser Simone Bullion admitted to having a few initial fears about the impact a planned solar farm might have on a County Wildlife Site.

She told the seminar she had been “a bit sceptical at first” over the 35megawatt Broxted Solar Farm on the former Stradishall Airfield at Hundon. She had feared that it might have adverse effects on the site's key ecological groups - its birds and its flora.

However, thanks to conditions attached to St Edmundsbury

Borough Council's planning approval, and the positive attitude of the landowner towards wildlife, Dr Bullion said she liked to think the site was now “ticking all the boxes.”

The site was designated as a County Wildlife Site (CWS) in the 1990s and featured 100 hectares of rough grassland and secondary woodland that had been planted by the Ministry of Defence.

The grassland was an “unusual” habitat in an area of the county that was otherwise “very arable”. It held special bird interest and was botanically important, holding

species such as adder's tongue, pyramidal orchid and bee orchid, she said. The planning authority had placed conditions on approval that stipulated that there had to be a “long-term environmental strategy” with compensatory habitat provision and monitoring of the key ecological groups.

Working with the landowner, a “vision” had emerged for the site. It was now grazed in summer by sheep at a density of two per hectare and in summer and autumn by cattle at a density of one head per hectare.

Plant diversity and structure

had been maintained and the solar panels - the rows of which were set eight metres apart - had given an “instant canopy effect as if we had instant woodland without the leaf litter,” said Dr Bullion. “It has not changed the vegetation diversity at all but structurally it is different now. You'd have thought it would be drier under the panels but no, it is more moist and there are more worm casts and sunbake is prevented and there is less soil evaporation.”

Last winter, bird surveys had found 22 skylarks and 50 meadow pipits on the CWS and

“large numbers” of reed buntings, yellowhammers and linnets on the conservation strips that had been planted. Breeding bird surveys this year had recorded 48 species, 10 of which were UK priority species and 19 species were “probably” breeding within the solar farm. Skylark numbers were increasing on compensatory grassland areas and there were three pairs of turtle dove on the estate.

Her “verdict so far” was: “If you have a good management plan and people who are determined to deliver it, it will work.”