***Milton Keynes Natural History Society***

**Book Review by Mike LeRoy**

‘**SWIFTS AND US: THE LIFE OF THE BIRD THAT SLEEPS IN THE SKY’**

**by** **Sarah Gibson**

At least two MKNHS members came across grounded swifts this summer and wondered what to do. There is good advice available and a few dedicated volunteers who care for swifts in trouble, but there is bad advice too. This is where this book begins. More about that later.

Sarah Gibson has had a tough life, which included 20 years of debilitating illness. She came through this and decided to make her home and garden work for wildlife. This included nest-boxes for swifts.

Out of this experience she set up a group in her small town in Shropshire to find where swifts were nesting, to engage with property owners when swift nest-places were threatened by building ‘improvements’ and to put up swift boxes.

Sarah often watched swifts in flight, particularly the dusk assembly of swifts circling above their colony nest-sites. She is a capable observer and learned much from this. From this experience Sarah decided to write a book about swifts, to fill all the gaps in her knowledge and tell others.

Earlier this year, when I first heard that this book was going to be published, I was underwhelmed by the publishers’ promotion of it and its dull-looking dust-jacket. It sounded as though it would add little to what was already widely known by keen swift-watchers. I expected a slim book that might not answer many of the questions in my mind. The reality is different. And there is no need to be put off by this next fact. The book is over 300 pages long … though in a small format. But this is not some high-flying academic book with reams of references to obscure academic papers; though it has taken account of a number of these.

It is a very readable, well-written book. It doesn’t feel like a long book, partly because its chapters are all short, though there are 24 of them. Each of these deals concisely with different aspects of swifts. It needs all these chapters because Sarah Gibson has set out to cover all aspects of swifts that come to mind.

She starts with her own story of how her interest in swifts developed. She then goes all the way back to the origins of swifts, including a photo of a 49 million years-old fossil of a swift, not just the bones but feathers too. Her account includes the myths such as swifts overwintering under water in ponds. She tells us about different swift species around the world, bird ringing and the remarkable story of the swift tower on Oxford Natural History Museum and all that is still being learned about them there 75 years later. She tells us about their life in Africa and migration northwards to breed.

Her book then returns to the annual cycle and the arrival of swifts to Britain over April and May. She describes the amazing structure of swifts that enables them to reach a downward flight speed once measured at 69.3mph. Her story then turns to key people and groups in Britain who have been working to protect and promote swifts and to provide nesting-places for them.

She tells of midsummer swift colony flight displays. Many people think swift calls are all about ‘screaming’. This is only one activity, usually involving young swifts later in the summer who fly fast in a tight formation, pursuing each other while screaming loudly together. But swifts have many other calls and Sarah Gibson tells us that the word ‘screaming’ is “a totally inadequate description of their evocative cries”. This illustrates what an acute observer she is.

Sarah Gibson then takes us on a country-by-country tour to: Italy, Spain, Switzerland, to tell us about how swifts are faring there. She brings us back to Northern Ireland to tell us about fitting geolocators to swifts to track their migration movements; and to tell us about a Zoology student who searched for swift nests and was able to find 135.

The book draws towards a close with the wistful feelings of late summer when swifts gather and depart for Africa. Then there are final thoughts about the decline in swift numbers of Britain and what more we can do about this.

The bad advice? Sarah begins her book with an account of her group finding a swift that had crashed to the ground, then followed the common belief that you should launch them from a height. The young swift was thrown into the air from an upper window and fell to the ground. A vet checked it. Sarah spent weeks nursing it back to health and feeding it with crickets, but found that it would still not fly. It was only then that a different vet found it had broken a bone in its shoulder. Sarah emerged sadder and wiser and determined to learn as much as she could about swifts.

There are 8 pages of colour photos in the centre of the book and some poorly reproduced monochrome photos set within the text. But this is a well-written book that is thoroughly worth reading.

*‘Swifts and Us: The Life of the Bird that Sleeps in the Sky’ by Sarah Gibson*

*(2021: William Collins) The hardback was £16.99 full price. The paperback is due to be published in April 2022 at £9.99 full price.*