

By now, the skies over Church Stretton, surrounding villages and local pastures should be showing signs of the graceful, swooping flight and twittering songs of the Swallow. Traditionally viewed as a herald of spring, these birds return to their birth areas and nest sites in the UK, mostly in April and early May, after spending our winter in South Africa.

They have a long association with humans and were reported as nesting on buildings by Virgil as early as 29 BC. They share the air space around our homes and follow agricultural machinery and stock, to feast on the flies and aphids disturbed by their passage. Their association with the built environment is reflected in their naming. In North America they are known as Barn Swallows (a name also employed historically this side of the Atlantic, for example in Gilbert White's *Natural History of Selbourne*) and were also known as Chimney-Swallows in the past. Their homely familiarity and valuable habit of eating insects has gained Swallows a place in folklore. It was once believed, for example, that destroying a Swallow's nest would result in your dairy cattle yielding milk with blood in it and would prevent hens laying!

Swallows were probably cave and cliff nesters prior to the advent of human stone and brick structures. Now, however, nests are typically built in sheds and garages, on agricultural outbuildings, church porches, underneath bridges and culverts, in chimneys and, occasionally, in mines and collieries. In these sites they build cup-shaped nests from pellets of mud and line them with feathers. These structures are often long-lasting, may be used for a second brood of young and often, with necessary renovations, for 10-15 years after that.

Swallows are 'hirundines', a bird group that in the UK also includes the Sand and House Martins (plus a few rare vagrants). (The Swift, despite its superficial similarity, is not closely related.) All hirundines migrate south in winter to maintain access to their diet of flying insects. (Up until just two centuries ago, it was widely believed that Swallows spent the winter hibernating in the mud at the bottom of ponds!) Swallows leave in September and October: most travel across France, Spain and Morocco, then cross the Sahara to reach South Africa. They migrate by day at low altitude and feed en route. Nevertheless, many die of starvation, exhaustion or in storms on the trip. While on their wintering grounds they feed largely in grassland habitats and roost, often in huge numbers, in reed beds.

This species is widespread and is found in Europe, Asia, Africa and the Americas, with a population of perhaps 190 million birds. In the UK, its population fluctuates strongly, largely due to weather and climatic conditions. Swallows need rainfall to find sufficient mud for their nests and to encourage insect prey populations. However, excessively wet conditions (especially if cold as well) will decrease insect numbers and lead to starvation of chicks. Climatic change in their wintering quarters is believed to be responsible for Swallows sometimes starting their return migration in poor condition, and the expansion of the Sahara has made it a more significant obstacle to cross than it once was. Hot, dry summers in Europe and shifts away from cattle grazing have also had an impact on Swallow numbers overall. Rainfall amounts in the semiarid Sahel region of Africa have also been shown to be related to British Swallow numbers.

Swallows take readily to artificial nesting cups. They can also be encouraged to nest in garages and similar structures.

Make an opening under the eaves about 50 mm (2 in) high and 500 mm (8 in) wide, or leave the door open. Fix a platform high in the garage for a shallow box or cup and put a plastic bag beneath it to intercept droppings. You can block off areas from which you wish to exclude birds with polythene sheeting.

While not in a desperate state in this country, Swallows are nevertheless vulnerable. We cannot feed them directly but, by encouraging insect life in our gardens and minimising the use of insecticides and 'bug zappers', we can enhance their food supply. Additionally, by providing artificial nest sites, we can help to ensure that this harbinger of fair weather continues to grace our skies.

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The author is British Trust for Ornithology Ambassador for the Garden BirdWatch (GBW) scheme in southern Shropshire and is available to speak to local organisations on GBW, as well as answering questions on garden birds and feeding. Please record your Swallows and other garden visitors through GBW – the largest year-round survey of garden birds in the world. For a free information pack, please email gbw@bto.org or telephone (01842) 750 050 and ask for the Garden Ecology Team. You can also contact John on (01694) 724 170 or at arnfield.2@osu.edu



An adult Swallow has steel-blue upperparts, a rufous forehead, chin and throat, pointed wings and a deeply-forked tail. A wide bill enhances its ability to scoop insects from the air.

Photo: John Harding, BTO Library



Young Swallows in a typically-located nest within a building. The bright orange 'gape' is a stimulus to adult birds to feed the chicks. (Photo: John Harding, BTO Library)