

The Swallow



With the onset of warmer weather, you may have noticed that a few of our summer visitors have already arrived. One bird which epitomises this season is the Swallow or more correctly, the Barn Swallow. This bird will have travelled about 6,000 miles all the way from southern Africa and over the perilous Sahara Desert to reach our shores. What a feat! I count myself fortunate to have seen these birds migrating over the Sahara. They fly low and purposefully, as if their life depended on it, and in fact it does. Many a bird perishes in this unforgiving terrain.

I am sure many of you are familiar with the Barn Swallow. It is a streamlined bird and has deep blue glossy back and cream coloured underparts. It has a red flush on the forehead and under the bill. The wings are long and pointed and its tail is forked and is much longer than that of the House Martin or Swift with which it can be confused. The male has longer tail streamers than the female.

Not all of us are fortunate to have Swallows nesting on our properties as they prefer to build their cup-shaped mud nests in open barns or outbuildings. Some will nest in porches and even bird hides. It is lovely to hear the twittering call of these birds as they fly low over fields and open water while catching their food on the wing. In early autumn when they are about to migrate, they can be seen and heard in large numbers, chattering away on overhead wires.



Photo by John Harding/BTO

Some things you may not know about the Swallow:

It is the national bird of Estonia and Austria.

The collective term for a group of swallows is a flight or a gulp.

An old wife's tale says if a Swallow's nest is damaged, milk from cows turns bloody and hens will not lay eggs.

One of the first mentions of the Swallow in literature is in Aesop's fable, 'The Spendthrift and the Swallow'. A young man, on seeing a Swallow, decided that as summer had arrived he would sell his last coat to raise some money. Soon after, the weather changed for the worse and he found the frozen body of the Swallow. Because he was also affected by the cold, he blamed the Swallow for his demise. Hence the moral, one Swallow does not make a summer.

Enjoy the sight and sounds of these graceful birds as they stay with us during the summer months.

Jean is a voluntary Ambassador for the British Trust for Ornithology's (BTO) Garden BirdWatch scheme in Nottinghamshire. If you would like to help the BTO by recording birds and other wildlife which visit your garden, contact Jean at jpbirds@talktalk.net

Jean is also able to arrange talks to groups.