

# Mother

## M I G R A T I O N

**T**he Swallow is among the most popular of British birds, having long been regarded as a harbinger of Spring in this country.

December !

None other than the esteemed 18th century naturalist, the Rev. Gilbert White, of Selborne, was sympathetic to the notion that birds, like Swallows, did not migrate at the

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However, prevailing weather conditions at the time of their arrival in March/April are so-often wintry, giving rise to the warning that 'One Swallow does not a Summer make'. Traditionally, Swallows are a sign of good luck among country folk, with farmers reluctant to destroy a Swallow's nest for fear of the misfortune that might befall them.

Swallows have been extremely well-studied down through the ages. The migration of Swallows was first recognised as long ago as 700 BC, when the Greek poet, Anacreon recorded the return of these birds to Egypt, and realised that this was one of their winter retreats. Today, it is known that some 220 million Swallows over-winter each year in Africa, of which German birds account for those wintering in Central Africa, while British and Russian birds fly further south, 'leap-frogging' other European breeders to winter in and around Johannesburg, South Africa. You always know that Autumn's chill and Winter's cold are just around the corner when local Swallows start congregating on overhead wires, as they contemplate the culmination of another breeding season and the onset of their migrational flight south to Africa.

Mid-September, traditionally, sees the departure of many Scottish-breeding Swallows on their travels, a time when many birds in Oban and Lorn may still be feeding late broods in the nest. Consequently, late stragglers may still linger in the area during October-November, with exceptionally tardy individuals being recorded even into

close of Summer, but hibernated in the mud of marshy pools, in the masonry of churches, in dry stone walls, and behind crumbling cliff faces. Over 200 years later, we know such thoughts to be fanciful, as millions of migrant birds leave this country to seek the warmer climes of the Mediterranean and Africa each Autumn. And, that they fly unaided, too, and not having hitched a ride on the back of another, larger bird!

Bi-annual migrations, to and from the Oban area, may offer birds, like the Swallow, a competitive edge when it comes to breeding, yet many pay the ultimate price for such long distance travel. After a long and demanding breeding season, Swallows undertake a quite extraordinary migrational journey halfway across the globe, linking the continents of Europe and Africa, collecting some 6,200 air miles into the bargain!

Local birdwatcher, Stuart Gibson, said:

"It almost beggars belief that a tiny bird should be capable of travelling such vast distances across the face of our planet.

"Swallows are diurnal (daytime) migrants, preferring to feed as they go, unlike so many migratory birds that travel by the light

of the stars, having spent several weeks laying down fat

reserves to help sustain them on their long haul flights.

"Some small migrants will complete their journeys by dint of huge flights encompassing hundreds or thousands of miles at a time, arriving at their intended

