

Nature's A L M I R A C I L E

destination in days.”

Spring migration tends to be a somewhat rushed affair for Swallows, as birds attempt to get back to their breeding grounds quickly. In Autumn, Swallows flit from place to place in a more relaxed fashion, often taking several weeks or even

months to get to where they want to be. Migrating Swallows fly up to 200 miles daily, travelling at an average speed of 20 m.p.h.

Migration is a hazardous busi-

ness for Swallows and many birds die from starvation, exhaustion and in storms as they cross low over the sands of the Sahara Desert. Swallow populations fluctuate from year to year (British population : 375,000 pairs) and are affected greatly by weather. They require rain to provide wet mud for nest building and for encouraging an abundance of insect prey, but cold, wet weather prevents them from feeding. Large scale mortality is regularly recorded after bad weather, during both breeding and migration. On the other hand, hot and dry weather can result in many deaths through dehydration and heat stress.

Swallows can be great indicators of our weather and, as a result of simply observing the behaviour of local birds, it may be possible to predict the following day's weather (give or take a shower or two !) During fine, dry and settled days, Swallows feed higher in the sky, but during periods of changeable and depressed weather they tend to come lower, following their insect prey, often affording quite spectacular views as they flit or buzz past at eye level.

Research has shown that Swallows are returning to their breeding areas in poor condition nowadays and are laying fewer eggs than previously.

Nest sites are traditional, and provided the food supply has not changed, the same nests or sites are used from one year to the next, often by the same two birds. However, Swallows rarely live longer than four years, but one individual was known to survive until the ripe old age of 16 years. During it's life, this miracle of Mother Nature would have flown over 200,000 miles, simply flying between Britain and Africa during migration!

