

A Midsummer

The 18th century naturalist, the Rev. Gilbert White, of Selborne, was sympathetic to the notion that birds, like Swallows, Swifts and House Martins, did not migrate at the close of summer, but hibernated, 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! The distinctive shape of Swifts, scything through the sky at high speed, is a true harbinger of summer, as the first returning migrants do not appear in the skies above Oban until (usually) the second week in May.

Swallows, on the other hand, arrive in April, when the West Highland weather can still hold the chill of winter. Little is known regarding the true abundance of Swifts in Britain, so it is largely unknown numbers that return to the small loose colony that nests annually in the roof-space of some of Oban's older houses, near McCaig's Tower. These birds may be seen at any time of the day, but are most obvious in the evening, when parties can be heard 'screaming', as they career excitedly and at breathtaking speed around roof tops and houses. The Swift has one of the weakest bills of any British bird. Being an insectivore, this species eats mostly flying insects and airborne spiders, and relies on its very wide gape to catch these. Once caught, up to 1500 small food items may be stored in the bird's crop, before being presented to the developing young in the nest. These flying insects are only available during fine weather; young swifts often encounter problems with the Oban

weather in summertime, when its parents cannot satisfy its demand for food.

Many young birds would simply starve during such times, but Swifts are able to drop their body temperature and enter into a period of torpidity in cold and wet weather. Once the warmer weather returns, they emerge from this enforced summer 'hibernation' and recommence growth. However, because of this variability in their food supply, young Swifts tend to grow at different rates in different years. In warm summers they fledge the nest at about 5 weeks of age, but when the weather is colder they may take 8 weeks to reach the flying stage (assuming they survive at all).

This availability of food dictates that Swifts are one of the last migrants to return to the Oban area from their African winter quarters in spring, and one of the first to depart from their breeding grounds in August.

Before they do so, young Swifts have to learn to feed for themselves, having left the 'comfort' and safety of their nest when their parents were away feeding. They have never seen a flying insect in its natural environment before, and they will get no help from Mum and Dad, as many other birds do after they leave the nest.

What's more, having left the nest, these young Swifts may never re-alight on land for another few years, until it is time for them to breed. The small legs and feet of a Swift do not allow them to perch on buildings or overhead wires, like Swallows, so the only time a Swift needs to land is during the breeding season. Should a Swift become grounded (for whatever reason), it would starve to death, unless it was helped become airborne once more.

Swifts are among the most aerial of birds. The long, thin, scimitar-shape of a Swift's wing

