

A walk on the wild side

Cholderton Estate

Swallows

The first Swallows arrived here on 2nd April. How welcome and heart-warming it is, to hear their spirited chattering and watch their soaring, fluttering flight high over the farm yard. Within a few days a flock of 14 were twisting and weaving low over the buildings in a celebratory pre-nesting synchronised flight.

It is a major event for all on the farm; that date to be carefully transcribed into the diary for comparison with previous years. This marks not the start of summer, but more that their arrival will drag a reluctant spring behind them. Just so this year, when the weather became colder and we soon suffered a devastating frost that burnt the fresh red leaves of Walnut to blackened cinders and even made the new nettles droop. The Swallows, at least, had a warm barn to shelter in and apparently were unscathed, bolstered by good hatches of invertebrates emerging from the grazed pastures in the brief afternoon sunshine.

Just before Easter, I ventured down to the Dorset coast and there, on a walk with family along the cliff tops, saw a stream of Swallows coming off the sea. Thrown from the waves like slingshot, catching the wind in such a way that with closed wings they sped past, arrows of blue and white, cutting through air and skimming between the Gorse and other scrub with the skill and speed that would defy any attempt of a man-made machine to emulate them.

Our Swallows winter in South Africa, returning to the same roosts year on year. Leaving in February, they arrive at the Sahel in March. Here they face the challenge of a northerly wind to slow them and all the desperate trials put upon them by the crossing of nearly 2000 miles of the greatest desert of earth. Predation, both avian and human awaits them and then the scarcity of suitable oases and sudden storms are but a few of the hazards ahead of them. How many shrivelled and desiccated bodies lie in those desolate wastes?

Yet for all this, they still return to our cattle sheds and stables.

By farming organically with leguminous rich pastures, we ensure that swallows will have the insects they require to raise their families. However, do we all provide sufficient access for them into our sheds?

Leave windows open or take out some grass; don't close all the stable doors – look for places where you can give them access, a garage, a boiler room, the farm workshop. There are many possibilities.

If droppings from the nest are a problem screw a wooden ledge under the nest to catch them.

Do what you can to help our Swallows propagate and speed their way to back to their winter home and when the time comes, bring Spring back with them next year.

Henry Edmunds FRES
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