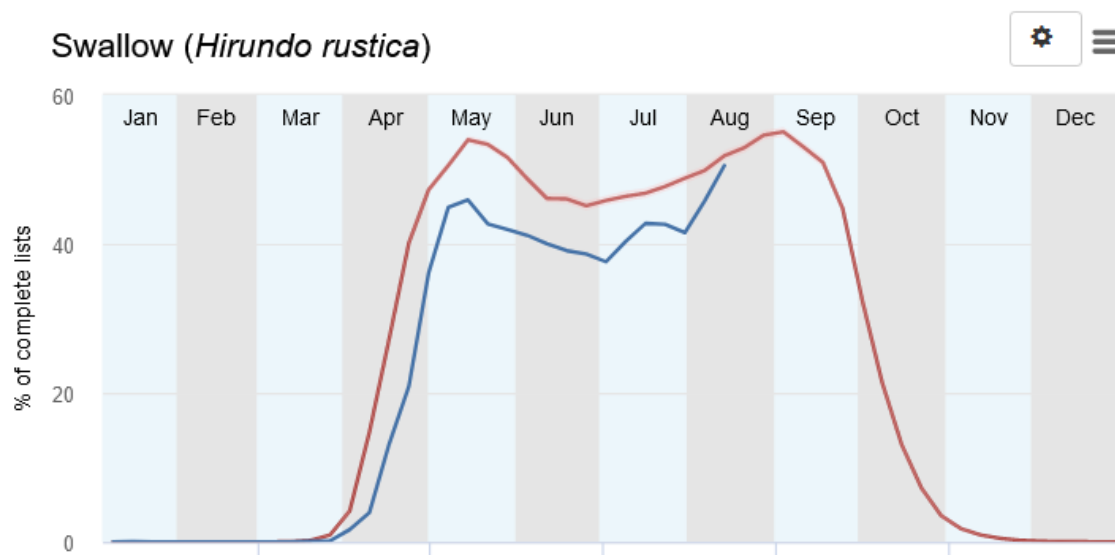


The Swallow Saga

Many observers have been reporting fewer Swallows this year and this is borne out by evidence from a BTO survey called Birdtrack – see the graph on the previous page. Swallows arrived late this year (lower line) compared with the average (upper line) and in lower numbers. It is thought that both Swallows and House Martins hit bad weather in Europe in the early spring whilst on migration and were unable to feed. This happens quite regularly and both birds can produce large numbers of young in a breeding season to compensate. This indeed seems to have happened this year as the graph climbed upwards in August representing fledged young birds entering the count.



In contrast to the apparent lack of Swallows reported by many people we have suffered here from too many Swallows all trying to nest in our very large shed (an ex-army pumphouse). There is plenty of space but they are very intolerant of each other so all through May and early June there was much screeching, chasing and dashing around and very little nesting going on despite the pretty well perfect weather. During this period a pair of House Sparrows were also trying to nest in the pumphouse (for the first time, ignoring our specially provided sparrow terrace) and were trying to use old Swallow nests. One old Swallow nest was filled with a huge mass of grass and straw courtesy of the Sparrows, only to be completely removed a week later. (Who by?) One Swallow nest which was being renovated was destroyed completely – whether by accident or intent we do not know. A pair which had arrived in April settled quickly but abandoned the nest when the big gang of new Swallows arrived in mid-May.

Eventually in June one pair of Swallows built a new nest in the log store and settled down to lay, brood, hatch and fledge a brood of 5, but fledging was not until early July. Another pair built a nest in Peter's swallow-proof shed-within-a-shed – he left the door open for a few days and suddenly there was a perfect mud nest up in the corner! This pair eventually fledged 4 young at the beginning of August. And the door is now shut! There still seemed to be two more Swallows flying in and out of the unglazed side window but no sign of a nest. However a few days ago (Aug 10th) there were 3 young swallows, quite well feathered but not fledged, sitting together on the floor by the side door where there was a bit of breeze under the door. We had no idea if the parents were feeding them. We put some grass in a cereal bowl and tried to get the birds into it – one stayed in place but the others skittered away and hid under all the various objects that you have in a shed. The plan had been to put the bowl somewhere near the nest – but we could not find the nest at all. I think it must be somewhere in the roof and the chicks jumped out as they were too hot, but we could not find it. (You can usually find a nest by locating a pile of droppings). So we had to leave them to it. Will they survive? We shall just have to wait and see.

Meanwhile the log-room pair have started on another brood.

Update on 17th August: Shortly after writing this piece we found that the 3 baby swallows were back altogether in the cereal bowl on the ground and that the parents were feeding them! Amazing. And today there were two fledged youngsters perched on the crossbeams!!

Rosemary Royle