

Our swallows

Our swallows usually arrive on about 17th April, then produce two, sometimes three broods, in the safe protected roof-space of our ex-army pumphouse. Of course, over the 13 summers we have now lived here, they have not always been the same swallows, though some of them will have been offspring of previous couples. Sometimes a pair which have nested the previous year arrive back within a few days of each other, and because they know the area and know each other they get into the breeding process very quickly. After a week or so away from the area, presumably feeding up getting into shape for breeding, they often just refurbish a previous nest and then start to lay immediately. When this happens they can often fit in 3 broods, with the last birds not fledging till early autumn when many swallows have already left the country.

The more usual situation is that several birds arrive – they will be a mix of previous breeders and returning offspring. (There must also be some incomers from elsewhere otherwise there would be a problem with in-breeding.) There is then a protracted period where they work out exactly who is going to pair-up with whom, and where they are going to nest. And despite that fact that there is plenty of space for more than one pair (they can even have separate rooms!) this has never happened. Eventually a pair settles down, builds or refurbishes a nest and gets on with breeding – but this can be quite late in the season as it was this year – they did not lay eggs until the end of May.

This nest was not successful. We believe the nest got very overheated, positioned as it was just under a south-facing asbestos roof. When we arrived home from holiday, on the last day of a very hot spell, the youngsters were on the ground, two dead, two alive. We popped the live ones back into the nest and the parents started feeding them, but they did not survive. I am glad to say the parents then built a second nest, in an equally unsuitable place, but this time they have fledged 6 youngsters – the most we have even seen in one brood. As I write this they are all swooping around the garden together which is great to watch. This time the dismal summer weather was their saviour as the roof never got too hot!

All this leads me to consider the numbers. Most years, about 10 young swallows fledge from our pumphouse. Similar figures are probably achieved at the toilet in St Brides and the parking hut at Marloes Sands and lots of other places. Yet the country is not overrun with swallows. The attrition rate of young swallows on their long migrations must be very high. These are quite big, feisty birds - have you ever seen them dive-bombing a cat? - but even so, many do not survive. Predation, lack of food and bad weather - all must take their toll.

Some swallows have cottoned on to this and no longer migrate. There is now a breeding population of Barn Swallows (to give them their full name) in South Africa. And why not – the climate is very similar to ours and it truly does seem more sensible. However, I am not sure what the local varieties of swallows think about that – many of which migrate from Central Africa to South Africa in order to breed - quite the opposite to our swallows which migrate there to spend the winter!

Rosemary Royle