

## The Swallow

One of the highlights of a recent trip to Israel was seeing small groups of Swallow heading south just as they do in England at the same time of year. But this time they were passing over a desert landscape, following the same Rift valley that would take them much of the way through Africa. A few years earlier I had the equally thrilling experience of hearing a Swallow passing overhead in Arizona, again in a desert setting but this time following the one river which flows north from Mexico into the States. It was late March and the Swallow was heading north just as its confreres would be doing at the same latitude and time in Europe. Like the Swift there is something immensely reassuring about this regular return and departure of a 'native' bird, but 'native' to whom! Whose Swallows are they?

W.G.Sebald remembers them

*'in the summer evenings during .. childhood when I had watched from the valley as Swallows circled in the last light, still in great numbers in those days, I would imagine that the world was held together by the courses they flew through the air.'*

They are still in great numbers now but not so, locally. There seems to have been a shift to the north and the west, perhaps because of changing climate and land use. On the microscale they have shifted from us at the Abbey, where pairs have nested in the past, to concentrate at Abbey Farm. This is the place to keep an eye out for the first and last of the year and perhaps for a hungry Hobby which shares our fascination with the Swallow and will follow them north and south as they stitch the world together. So what is it that makes them such a pleasing bird to see? Perhaps it is because they are an attractive and easily recognised bird and close companions of humankind throughout the world. Gone are the days when we imagined that they might hibernate in mud at the bottom of ponds. We now know that they will winter not only in South Africa but in South America and Australia too. And they have a habit of flying low and in a distinctive fashion,

*'The Swallows twisting here and there  
Round unseen corners of the air.'*

in the words of Andrew Young.

Tim Dee once saw Swallows settling on a turf field for all the world as if in play,

*'They flew to the grass as they do over water, angling their bodies horizontally above it and sliding lower and lower to its surface. And because that surface was so smooth and so flat – even smoother and flatter than water – they slowed their wings and gently stopped down on to it. Then they sat around on the short turf on their short legs as if they were doing it simply because they could... it suited the lawn. It was a temporary fiction: a playground or a holiday. And the birds knew it.'*

They bring us then great delight appealing to our own need for escape and play- if only we could cross land and sea as they do. But they are also reminders of our own failure to live 'naturally', at peace with one another and with the landscapes in our care. For those desert swallows were passing over lands denied to humans by minefields in the Jordan valley and miles of border fence in Arizona. Tim Dee too has a salutary account of the Swallows of Chernobyl, which ends thus:

*'There is it turns out, a gradient in this flat place, Chernobyl is a sink..it takes life in but gives next to no life out. Radiation has triggered variations that no Swallow personality can possibly cope with . It is eating them alive.'*

Enough said!

Br.John