

# Swallow



## 1. Life of a swallow

### 1.1. Courtship

A young male swallow arrived in England along with many other males in late April and started looking for a nest site. He found a farm building with a good entrance and plenty of ledges on which to build a nest.

### 1.2. Nesting

The nest was built by both birds in the shape of a saucer. They had used mud mixed with straw and bound together with saliva to build the nest. The female lined the nest with grass and feathers.

When she was ready she laid five eggs, one each day. They were white with dark markings. She would sit on the eggs to keep them warm and protect them from danger.

He would keep a close eye on the nest in case an unpaired male swallow came along, killed the young nestlings and tempted his mate away to start his own family. Unpaired males have been known to pick up the nestlings one at a time, fly away from the nest and just drop them onto the ground.

### 1.3. Growing up

In May, after two weeks the chicks hatched from their eggs. They were completely naked and blind. The male was kept very busy finding food for the family, particularly insects.

When the chicks were 21 days old they fledged. The family stayed together for another ten days, the adults still feeding the young and they would roost together in their nest. The parents would give the young an in-flight meal whilst they were flying. Gradually they learnt to feed themselves.

The female prepared herself for a second brood. Some of the young from the first brood helped to feed the second brood chicks.

After breeding, the pair would join other swallows in a communal roost, sometimes thousands strong.

#### **1.4. Migration**

As the summer drew to an end and the days began to shorten, the temperatures started to drop, and there was less food to be found. This was the time to make ready for a long flight to South Africa.

Groups of swallows assembled and began to prepare for the trip. You might see them gathered on telegraph wires.

Their route took them south, across the English Channel, through western France, across the Pyrenees, down eastern Spain into Morocco and across the Sahara desert and finally to South Africa. The 10,000-kilometre journey was full of danger. For example, when they flew over the Sahara Desert there was no food, water or places to rest.

They flew low most of the time, eating insects as they went and stopped over night for a rest.

In the winter in South Africa they fed in small flocks and joined together in the evening with other swallows to form roosting flocks of thousands of birds.

#### **1.5. Survival**

Travelling to and from South Africa is a hazardous time and many birds die from starvation, exhaustion and storms.

Swallows fly fast and are very agile, so it is difficult for birds of prey to catch them in flight. Sometimes a hobby or sparrowhawk may take them by surprise.

At the first sign of danger from any bird of prey or crow or magpie, swallows will band together and mob them. They will even attack a cat or human if they think it threatens their nest.

Sometimes sparrows will occupy their nests and throw out eggs and young chicks.

Swallows can be very aggressive at the nest, chasing off intruders, even fighting fiercely if they have to.

Male swallows can be very selfish if food becomes short. They will look after themselves rather than feed the brood.

Swallows may be four years old when they die.

## 2. Identification

### 2.1. Appearance

<b>Size</b>	Bigger than robins.
<b>Appearance</b>	Dark blue upper-parts, whitish under-parts, a red patch on their throat and forehead and a long V shaped tail with streamers.
<b>Confusion</b>	Swift, house martin
<b>When</b>	It is said that the appearance of the first swallow in April, heralds the start of spring.
<b>Where</b>	Open rural countryside.  Always return to England for the summer to breed, usually very close to where they were hatched or where they raised chicks the previous year. Sometimes they find the nest from the previous year.  Swallows also migrate to other European countries.
<b>Movement</b>	Graceful, fast flyers that enjoy swooping and changing direction quickly and often.  You will rarely see them walking on the ground or perched in a tree.



### 2.2. Feeding

<b>Favourites</b>	Flies, wasps, greenbottles and horseflies
<b>Habits</b>	Catch and eat food whilst flying.
<b>Other</b>	When thirsty will skim low over the surface of water scooping the liquid up into their open mouth.

### 3. Useful words

#### 3.1. Word search

See if you can find the following words in the word search.

Swallow, saliva, wasp, streamer, graceful, roost, Africa

V	B	A	F	R	I	C	A	R	N
M	Q	S	F	W	O	W	O	O	D
S	W	W	T	R	R	O	A	O	E
T	A	A	B	R	M	Y	B	S	U
P	M	L	I	A	E	O	I	T	P
L	F	L	I	G	T	A	J	H	K
R	O	O	T	V	F	M	M	X	C
D	S	W	A	R	A	Z	A	E	V
X	S	Q	Q	M	J	N	B	N	R
D	F	G	R	A	C	E	F	U	L

#### 3.2. Unscramble the following words

ING OO SC P	
SE LE AS MB	
MM AL UN CO	
O S R M T	
RA HA SA	
E L E G D	
ER UC SA	
ID QU LI	
RA HE LD	
WE ERN ST	

### 3.3. Understanding and problem solving

Now that you know about swallows have a go at answering these questions.

Describe how a swallow drinks water.

What danger does an unpaired male pose to young swallows in the nest?

Why do you think so many swallows roost together?

What materials are used in constructing a swallow's nest?

List some of the swallow's favourite foods.

How does a swallow know when it is time to depart for South Africa?

Draw a simple map to show a possible route for a swallow from England to South Africa.

Why do you think it is difficult for a bird of prey to catch a swallow?