HIRUNDO RUSTICA, Linn.

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Swallow.

Hirundo domestica, Ray, Syn., p. 71.

——— *rustica*, Linn. Syst. Nat., tom. i. p. 343.

“YEA, the Stork in the heavens knoweth her appointed times; and the Turtle and the Crane and the Swallow observe the time of their coming.” (Jeremiah, chap. viii. v. 7.)

With such a passage as the above before us for more than two thousand years, surely it is time to clear the mist from our eyes with regard to the history of the Swallow, or rather its going and coming, and to state its true whereabouts during the months of winter. How absurd have been the notions entertained on this subject; till very recently, I fear, the belief has prevailed that the Swallow retires beneath the waters, or hibernates in holes and caverns, until the genial spring calls it forth to life again. On this subject my friend Professor Owen has favoured me with the following remarks:—“When an animal is restricted to a particular kind of food, and that fails, it must either die, or be able to live without food, or migrate to the place where the food may abound. In the case of certain insectivorous animals indigenous to this climate, such as the hedgehog, lizard, and toad, the animals, not being endowed with the requisite powers of migration, have a constitution which enables them to live through the season of the absence of their food in a state of torpidity, during which there is little waste of power or tissue. The Swallow and other birds, in a similar predicament in regard to periodical absence of insect food, are as conspicuously endowed with the requisite powers of locomotion, enabling them to migrate to the suitable locality; whilst the energies and structure of their circulatory and respiratory organs, and the nature of their tegumentary covering, equally militate against the hypothesis of their passing our winter in a torpid state, especially in the element, water, which some lingering popular belief and repeated allegations of inaccurate observers assign as the hibernating medium of the *Hirundinidæ*. The ablest reasoners and most accurate observers amongst the physiologists and naturalists who have investigated this subject have so completely exhausted the question, that the winter submersion of the Swallow, like the great sea-serpent, ceases to trouble the naturalist, writing for naturalists; but in a work which addresses a wider sphere of readers, it may be needful to renew a protest against a still occasionally revived ‘vulgar error.’”

Every person is acquainted with the Swallow. Its habits are not recluse, neither is it of a timid disposition: as the fly is to the room, so is the Swallow to the open air—always before our eyes, always astir, gliding here and there, sporting over the mead, skimming the surface of the newly ploughed fields, or flitting about in mid-air in such a manner that, if we look up, we perceive the blue vault crossed, recrossed, and encircled, as it were, by the bird in the course of its evolutions. Our admiration of its movements is enhanced by their reflection in the water when it flies over the surface; and we are cheered with its slight twittering song when it settles for repose on the house-top or the edge of the chimney in which it has made its nest.

True harbinger of spring, the Swallow arrives in the British Islands at the commencement of April—sometimes during the first week, at others in the second, according as the season is late or early. Like the prodigal child, it has come home again, and we give it a true welcome. But where has the Swallow been wandering? “In obedience to one of the great laws of nature, the Swallow has been spending the winter in a warmer climate, where its natural food was to be procured in abundance; and thither it goes again when it has performed some other duties assigned to it, and when the seasons are no longer suited to its existence. The sun is its guide; it follows in his course, dwells under his genial influence, lives upon and thereby keeps in check the numbers of insects vivified by the great luminary: in a word, it is a migrant, wandering to and fro, and, like the Lapp, the Reindeer, and the Lemming in the Arctic regions, passes from north to south, and *vice versâ*, at the proper seasons; that is, it spends its winters in Morocco, and its summers in the British Islands.”

As autumn approaches, the Swallows leave us for the headlands of France, Portugal, and Spain, through which countries they pass by gradual stages to Gibraltar, where they cross the Straits to Africa; here they pass the winter, after which they again return to their former places of abode, and even to the same nests for many years. Previous to their autumnal migration, the Swallows collect in vast multitudes upon house-tops, church-roofs, telegraphic wires, and the trees beside rivers and ponds. It is said that the young birds do not accompany the older ones, but proceed by themselves, guided by that wonderful faculty of instinct which regulates all their actions, and directs them to those countries whence their parents came.

The above remarks, relative to the migratory movements of this bird, are equally applicable to those which frequent all parts of the Continent, from Calais to Sebastopol, or as far east as the bird is known, which

is stated to be the distant land of the Amoor. The individuals frequenting the latter country probably spend the winter in Southern China; while those found further west, in Russia for instance, resort to Asia Minor and Arabia; and those of Central Europe pass the Mediterranean, by way of Malta and the neighbouring islands, to Algeria. North America has a Swallow nearly allied to our own. This bird, like ours, is merely a summer visitant, resorting to the United States at that season, and retiring to Mexico and Central America at the opposite. Crossing the equator to South Africa on the one hand, and Australia on the other, we find migratory Swallows in both those countries, performing precisely the same offices, having similar natures, and whose movements, like those of the northern species, are regulated by the sun, but of course performed, owing to their geographical position, at the opposite season of the year.

In the antipodes, as with us, the Swallow is the harbinger of spring, and the cheerful companion of those who have adopted that part of the world as a home; for, like the English bird, it builds a similar nest in chimneys, barns, and outhouses, and lays eggs alike in character and markings: yet no naturalist will for a moment consider the *Hirundo neoxena* to be identical with the *H. rustica*.

Soon after its arrival in England, the Swallow commences the task of reproduction; the places chosen for the nest are exceedingly varied: the inner side of a smoking chimney, the shaft of a mine, the rafters beneath a bridge, barn, or boat-house are commonly selected; and many others might have been mentioned, were it necessary so to do. The nest is most ingeniously built of wet mud, with layers of straw-like grasses to secure the mass together, precisely as the hair prevents the plasterer's work from falling to pieces; within this half cup of a nest, which is placed against the wall or the rafter, is a lining of fine grasses and feathers. The following description of the nest of this species is by my son Franklin.

"When fishing at Denham, on the 25th of May, 1861, I observed several fine examples of the nests and eggs of this bird under the bridge. The exterior of these nests was, as usual, composed of mud mixed up with short pieces of hay or dried grass, with a few downy feathers of the Swan lining the interior. Some of the nests had evidently been constructed the previous year, and increased by the addition of an inch or two of fresh mud. They contained eggs in various degrees of forwardness, from those newly laid to those with the fully developed young in them. The eggs differed considerably in shape and marking, one set, before they were blown, being of a delicate pink, covered all over with minute spots of light reddish brown; the others, on the contrary, were broader and shorter in form, and were of the same delicate ground-colour, but with a smaller number of spots, and those of a brown tint, running into large blotches at the broader end."

The young Swallows remain blind for several days; still they grow fast, and rapidly fill the nest, their wide bills and bright-yellow fleshy gapes showing very conspicuously; and about the middle of June they leave the nest, and perch on some neighbouring bare branch on the sunny side of a tree: here they are fed by their parents, who bring them insects every minute, from morn till night. There these nestlings preen their feathers, exercise their wings by taking short flights round the branches of the tree, or sally forth to meet their parents and receive the food in the air, as portrayed on the accompanying Plate. The young, after this time, begin to hawk flies for themselves; and the summer being still young, the old birds often reconstruct the nest and rear a second brood. I find, by my note-book, that some Swallows were sitting on their eggs under the little romantic bridge at Formosa, near Cookham, in Berkshire, as late as the 8th of August. These late broods, however, I imagine, are frequently overtaken by our chilly autumns, and suffer severely from cold; they are, however, only the remnant of our summer Swallows. These are the birds that linger to a later period in the autumn, some even to October and November: perchance they have not sufficient strength to perform the journey across the seas; they therefore still remain. It is these birds which seek shelter in caves, crevices of rocks, and similar places; here the increased cold of night benumbs their muscles, paralyzes their systems, and renders them torpid: still their hearts beat, though but slowly; ultimately they get weaker and weaker, and, as a natural consequence, die. Under such circumstances their bodies are occasionally found; and, and hence, perhaps, has arisen the fable of the supposed hibernation of this bird.

The sexes are precisely alike in colour; but they differ in size, the female being somewhat smaller, and having the outer tail-feathers shorter, than her mate.

Forehead and throat deep orange-brown; sides of the neck, back, wings, and band across the breast deep bluish black; abdomen and vent reddish white, tinged with brown; tail-feathers black, all but the two middle ones, with a large white spot on the inner web; bill and irides black; legs and feet purplish brown.

The young gradually assume the colouring of the adult, from the time they leave the nest until they are twelve months old.

The figures represent an adult and a young bird, of the natural size.

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