

Country Diary of Robin Page: Swallows sweeten the summer

I am always sad to see the swallows go, although soon I will be following them to Africa. It has been a fantastic summer for them on the farm and round about the best swallow season for years. We had six nests used at various times; one close neighbour had another three, while my horse neighbours Judy and Graham had about 14 in use for first or second broods.

Horses seem to attract the right flies and insects, as do my cows. Graham has fixed nesting platforms and perching rails in most of their stables. He's one of my invaluable Last of the Summer Wine helpers around the farm; his favourite line when he views my odd-jobbing incompetence is: "No, you do it this way." His swallow-nesting platforms are impressive - and no wonder, considering his reading material of choice is the Screw fix catalogue. How sad is that? But it almost certainly makes better reading than Tony Blair's "memoir". Blair's memory of foot and mouth is quite unbelievable. More of that in a later Country Diary.

This year, the swallows used two barns and the old granary for nesting - it is difficult to believe that just a few years ago we were swallow-less. One of the reasons for their success is the mud puddle in the middle of the farmyard.

It formed over the winter, when frost bit into the concrete causing it to crack and collapse. We smoothed the dip over with soil and cow muck - and then, during the dry spring, we poured a couple of buckets of water over the mixture. A notice warned: "Please keep off SWALLOW MUD PUDDLE". I couldn't believe how well it worked.

"Oh," Graham said, "I thought the puddle was a gimmick."

It most certainly was not. A simple and easily maintained swallow lifeline, if only every clean, dry, concrete-covered farmyard had one swallows would be doing much, much better.

House martins arrived at regular intervals, too, from least half a mile away to grab beakfuls of mud. Sadly we have not managed to persuade them to nest around the farm or better still on the side of house - but we keep trying.

At times after the first broods were flying, the sky seemed full of swallows - it reminded me of distant days when every summer was a swallow summer. It is wonderful to have them back.

One afternoon I heard faint warning calls, so I picked up a "conservation stone" to throw at the expected sparrowhawk. Suddenly over the old granary streaked a dark bird followed by 50 enraged swallows showing amazing bravery - or stupidity as they harried the unwanted visitor. It was a hunting hobby, another remarkable summer visitor; an attractive, aerodynamic falcon that not only hunts down swallows, but also swifts.

It sped over the old granary, and over me, with the pack in full cry. Then as it angled upwards over a hedge it flipped onto its back at speed, lashing out with its sunlit yellow talons as it did so.

It was an astonishing aerial feat (or in this case feet) but the swallows were equally aerobatic as they took evasive action. Then the hobby was off at speed towards Graham's stables. It had been incredible three seconds of high-velocity drama so tense, violent and beautiful that it has been burnt indelibly into my memory.

The hobby came through the farm four more times that afternoon, each time with its harrying chorus of swallows, but I never saw it claim a victim. Hobbies are astonishing birds - I just wish they would stay away from our swallows and concentrate on dragonflies, said to be their favourite food.

The most fascinating autumn migration for me is that of the young cuckoos. Those ungainly foster-chicks, planted as eggs in the nests of assorted reed warblers and hedge sparrows by devious, opportunist parents, suddenly head south, unaided and alone, long after the adult cuckoos have left the country in July. How do they do it and what guides them? Who knows?

After missing cuckoos in Cambridgeshire in early summer, at last I heard and saw them in Suffolk in June at the RSPB's reserve at Lakenheath. . It was fantastic - four bitterns, three cuckoos and a barn owl in the air at once.

After I wrote about cuckoos here in June, readers told me of their sad cuckoo silences or joyful cuckoo choruses. One farmer from the Isle of Mull even called into the farmyard one afternoon to tell me that this was the best year in living memory for cuckoos on the island.

Cuckoos are one very good reason for visiting Mull next summer. There ought to be another reason, too as

an island with plenty of trees and no grey squirrels, surely it would make the ideal place to introduce red squirrels in complete safety; it could become a superb island refuge.

But no. Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) refuses to allow it. Sea eagles yes - red squirrels no. Perhaps SNH should stand for Squirrels Not Here.

Another other ideal place for the introduction of red squirrels would be the Isle of Man. But again, for reasons that seem totally bizarre, the island government will not give permission for an introduction. It would help biodiversity - and, just as it does on the Isle of Wight, it would also encourage tourism.

At the recent Royal Association of British Dairy Farmers bash in Birmingham, I shared my breakfast table with a charming lady from the Isle of Man. She suggested that I should visit the island. It sounded very tempting until she told me of the island's national flower - the cushag.

Apparently there are great swathes of it over much of the island and even poetry by Josephine Kermode praising its beauty:

But along the rills in the heart of the hills
The cushag may shine like the sun,
Where the golden flowers
Have fairy powers
To gladden our hearts with their grace,
And in Vannin Veg Veen,
In the valleys green,
The cushags have still a place.

The dreaded cushag has another name of course. You guessed it - ragwort (Jacobee). I think I'll stay at home after all.

Even after the departure of the swallows, summer tries to linger on during sunny interludes, in the form of pristine red admiral and comma butterflies on the flowers of ivy.

The ragged wings of the comma also defy my understanding. The hobby's wings and body are completely aerodynamic. But the comma's wings seem to be outrageously un-aerodynamic. How does evolution/creation come to such completely opposite extremes to achieve flight?