



Tattoo Two

by Carol Mitchell



Mephitic. The stench seeped through the wharves with its insidious vapour, a pervading, sickening miasma. But the man who walked along Blood Alley was unaffected by either it or the scurrying of the rats' claws scurrying in the darkness. Then he emerged onto the dockside and into a deafening wall of noise. It was what he knew whilst on land – the navvies and loadmasters shipping goods ashore, others stowing sacks into the holds just vacated without a thought of what had been there before. Probably best not to ask – let alone know.

He knew his destination was a few yards from a rancid hulk which was gradually being reclaimed by the filthy waters. Despite the rotting timbers of the doorway, the stinking hovel was still there from his previous visit and the toothless hag who cringed just inside its doorway grimaced at him as he entered. As he took off his shirt, just one single word was uttered. He pointed at his chest next to his last tattoo and said "Swallow". The hag nodded and set to work replicating the bird alongside the first one. Business complete, the man put his shirt on, dropped a few coins into the proffered claw and left. Now he knew that when his corpse was discovered, the finders would know he had sailed over 10000 miles across oceans and seas and he would know that the swallows would carry his soul to heaven.

Swallows appear frequently in prose, poetry, drama and fable. There are old Greek songs which welcome the bird and one of the earliest extant depictions is on a black-figured Greek vase in the Vatican collection showing a man and two boys watching for the first swallow with words being shown, somewhat bizarrely, as in modern-day bubble captions. Boy 1 declares 'Look there's a swallow', the man replies 'By Herakles, so there is' and Boy 2 raises his arm in greeting, saying 'There she goes: spring has come'. It was Aristotle who cautioned that 'one swallow does not make a summer' but this negative is counter-intuitive as, more than any other bird, swallows do mean summer as we watch eagerly for the first birds to arrive.

Palau - SG 848

Many of the myths relate to the colour of the patches on



the throat and forehead of the swallow and the bulk of these are attributed variously to the crucifixion of Christ.

South Africa SG 1155

The belief in Brittany was that the bird had pricked itself trying to remove the crown of thorns from Christ's

head: in Portugal it was the version that the stain came from its attempt to wipe away the blood from Jesus' wounds and in Russia the story was that the swallows had tried to remove the nails from the cross.

But the folklore is worldwide. The ancient Chinese believed, just as the Romans did, that it was especially lucky if swallows nested on a house and unlucky if they flew away. In addition, it was held that they had been sent to found the Shang dynasty by bringing the egg that the dynasty's ancestral mother 'swallowed' in order to conceive. In Southern Africa the Nguni peoples, which include the Zulus, describe swallows as 'Intaka Zanzi' (the birds of home) sent by the tribe's ancestors to comfort the living with the promise of future riches. Even in the most remote regions of the Arctic, the Inuit regarded the swallows as the spirits of children lost whilst at play and that, when the birds returned to make their nests on the rocky outcrops, they were recalling the happy joy of the departed children. A parallel comes from Russia where the twittering song was the chatter of the souls of the dead infants.

The ICUN estimates that there are over 200 million mature individuals in the world so it is surprising that, given its global proliferation, only one solitary country has adopted the swallow as its national bird. In the early 1960s following a campaign by ornithologists, Estonia adopted the Barn Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*) as its official national bird and, according to the National Symbols of Estonia website, the Barn Swallow is a 'characteristic guest of Estonian homes...its call can be heard from practically every eave or barn in the country'. The Award of the Soaring Swallow is bestowed by Wikipedia on people who are judged to have contributed outstanding articles about Estonia to the online encyclopaedia. It is also the logo of the Estonian Chamber of Agriculture and Commerce and the label is used to identify quality food products of the country.

Before the ubiquitous euro, the swallow was a regular feature on Estonian banknotes and coins.

A 2011 Estonian stamp depicts the Barn Swallow as 'Bird of the Year' (SG 647)



The cup-shaped nest of plant material and mud cemented to buildings is a familiar site and the four or five chicks in the nest screaming for their food is a memorable sound of summer.



Anguilla SG 650



Comoro Islands SG 550

That food is mainly insects caught in flight and over eighty insect families have been recorded in this species' diet.



Grenada Grenadines SG 600



Russia
SG MS6071



Anguilla SG 418

Some offspring are reluctant to leave the nest (echoes of human brats here!!) and a certain amount of persuasion may be required from the parents who wait and call nearby. Initially, the fledglings will spend time perched near their old nest whilst food is still brought to them but, as flying becomes easier, they start to follow the adults and search for food independently but still returning to their nest at night.



Estonia SG 404

Hungary SG 1284



Israel SG 1190

The youngsters need their voracious appetite as, towards the drawing in of the daylight hours, the parents will be saying

"All right, kids, it's now twice round the church spire then we're off to Africa".



Vatican City SG 133, 135, 136

The saddest sight of late summer is the thronging of the swallows on the telegraph wires before the southward mass

migration of these tiny creatures on their journey of thousands of miles to the southern parts of Africa.

Bahrain SG 440



Kuwait SG 592



Liechtenstein SG 892

On the journey, a preferred choice of roosts are reed beds – one Iberian study in 2012 estimated that 1.5 million birds were sheltering at a single lakeside in the Ebro valley. They also swoop downwards into tall, uniform crops such as maize.



Ciskei SG 63



Cyprus SG 686

It was this abrupt plunge towards lakeside reed beds which gave rise to the notion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that swallows hibernated at the bottom of pools. This theory was perpetuated by Gilbert White although he did not profess to having found one in this state or to have seen them in hibernation unlike some of the preceding and 'inventive observers'. Two centuries earlier in 1555, the Swedish Catholic writer, Olaus Magnus, in his 'History of the Northern Nations', promulgates the hibernation hypothesis with some very strange and imaginative observations.

"In northern waters, fishermen oftentimes by chance draw up in their nets an abundance of Swallows, hanging together like a conglomerated mass. In the beginning of autumn, they assemble together among the reeds; where, allowing themselves to sink into the water, they join bill to bill, wing to wing, and foot to foot."

The mind boggles to fathom what it was that the fishermen actually caught!!

But now, reading this, it is late spring and our visitors are on their way. It is not long to the visual delight of those brave, tiny specks appearing high above us to restore our hope that this will be a perfect summer for birds and humans alike – we all need it.

