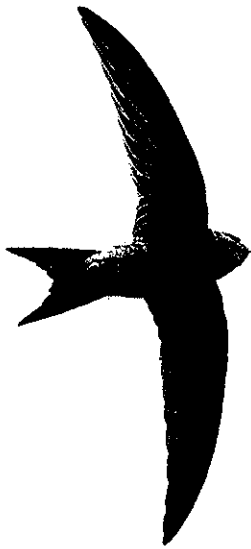


MARY COLWELL



Holy birds of the heavens

Old churches are favourite haunts of swifts, which will begin arriving in Britain in the next few days. The birds favour the nooks and crannies of aged buildings for their nests, and they need a helping hand now that their preferred habitat is declining

“E ven the stork in the heavens knows its times; and the turtle-dove, swallow, and crane observe the time of their coming,” wrote Jeremiah (8:7), who must have observed the many millions of birds, common swifts among them, that migrate into Israel every year. The changing seasons are marked by the arrival and departure of migrant birds; they form a living metronome, swinging to and fro between the hemispheres of the earth, keeping time to the beat of the seasons.

For many, the common swift holds a special place, probably because they have nested in man-made structures from time immemorial. They are our companions for only a short while, but their “screaming parties” high above the rooftops signal a promise of long, warm days after the darkness of winter. Richard Mabey, in his book *Nature Cure*, wonders if “birds like swifts arriving mysteriously in the spring, reappearing from nowhere at dawn, play their part in the generation of Resurrection stories”.

There is no doubt in my mind that Jesus would have watched them arrive in Jerusalem each March, swooping noisily over the city, and siting their nests in the crevasses and holes that were part of the fabric of the Temple. They do the same today – the Western Wall is the earliest known nesting site in the world and this year the special welcoming ceremony held by the Jewish community took place on 12 March. One rabbi expressed the reason for the yearly ritual beautifully: “They accompany me and my companions as we come here at dawn and dusk to pray; for us they are holy birds, it is good to welcome them home each year.”

Swifts arrive in Britain at the end of April – later than in Israel – and the vast majority will nest in buildings. Swifts need to be high above the ground, at least 15 feet, so they can launch straight into the air. They must also have an unobscured flight path into their nest holes as they swoop straight in at more than 15mph to avoid predation. Tall churches are therefore ideal.

In 2007, the Royal Society for the Protection

of Birds made a survey of nest sites in the United Kingdom and found that 5 per cent of our swift nests were in churches. This is even more important now than in previous decades as the common swift has been moved to the “amber list” for endangered species because of its rapid decline over the last 20 years. Numbers are down by a quarter since 1994 and half the breeding population of south-east England has disappeared.

As swifts are long-distance migrants between Africa and Europe, there are probably complex reasons for their decline, but there is one major problem that is not in doubt – lack of suitable nesting sites. Europe is slowly but surely modernising. Many old buildings are being renovated or replaced, which often means removing fascias, holes and crevasses and erecting glass and concrete.

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RENEWAL FOR MINISTRY

AT

DALGAN PARK

IMU Institute, Dalgan Park, Navan, Ireland
PROGRAMME 2012

The Renewal for Ministry Programmes at Dalgan Park offer the opportunity for personal growth and renewal in a welcoming and supportive environment to those who are engaged in Christian ministry. They also provide space for those who are in transition in ministry to pause and reflect on the call of the next stage of life. Together these programmes provide a substantial sabbatical renewal opportunity, offering:

- Holistic renewal in a multicultural community of women and men;
- The opportunity to develop a more contemplative approach to life;
- Individual accompaniment on the journey of self-renewal;
- Up-dating in Scripture and Theology;
- Space for rest and relaxation in a lovely parkland setting;
- An emphasis on environmental concern and care for the earth;
- Opportunities to visit ancient sites such as Newgrange, Glendalough, Clonmacnoise, Aran Islands, etc;

Autumn Term

The Faith and Mission Renewal Programme

(17 September - 14 December 2012)

This is a twelve-week residential renewal programme. Its principal aim is to provide an opportunity for personal/spiritual renewal. It has been found to be very helpful both for those who are looking for sabbatical renewal and for those returning from or preparing for, mission overseas or at home.

Winter/Spring Term

The Growth for Ministry Renewal Programme

(14 January - 31 March 2013)

This is a further residential renewal programme, similar in aim and methodology to the Faith and Mission Programme.

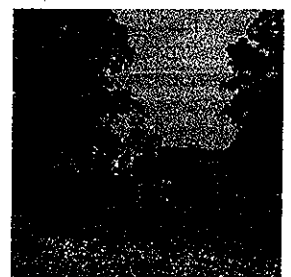
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Our sleek, modern world is not designed for the needs of creatures that thrive on imperfection. Bats and newts aside, building regulations by and large don't require us to make allowances for other creatures and so swift boxes, which are cheap and easily available, are not secured on to tall buildings as a matter of course. The urban environment is being smoothed out, erasing the biblical "birds of the walls".

Over the last few years, many church communities have been looking at what they can do to help buck the trend of environmental degradation. Some projects, such as erecting solar panels, can seem daunting and expensive and may well need a long process of consultation and planning before anything can be done. But here is a project that is straightforward. Swift Conservation (www.swift-conservation.org) can provide advice on which type of boxes to buy and where to site them. It is worth noting that swifts produce virtually no soiling at nest sites, as adults eat the droppings of their young. This is simple stewardship that is much needed by an extraordinary species on a steep downward trend.

Why are swifts so special? The only time they land is at the nest, with the whole of the rest of their lives being spent on the wing; eating, drinking, sleeping and mating are all done in the sky. They fly between Africa and Europe, coming back to exactly the same spot each year. So once swifts are established they will always be with you.

In 2011, the Alliance of Religions and Conservation formed the Green Pilgrimage Network (GPN), a collection of pilgrimage sites from all faiths that are working towards making pilgrimage green and sustainable. Naomi Tsur, the deputy mayor of Jerusalem, one of the cities involved in the GPN, has suggested forming a network of religious sites that welcome swifts as pilgrims, as they do already in Jerusalem. She would like to see churches, mosques, temples and synagogues do all they can to accommodate swifts so that they can always inspire us to prayer and wonder. Concern for nature cuts across all faiths and binds us together in a common goal to protect the living planet.

As we continue to celebrate the Easter season and remember the momentous events of 2,000 years ago, let us know that swifts too were there as Christ was crucified. Their cries may even have been a source of comfort during the dark hours of his Passion. And swifts may well have scythed the dawn sky on Easter morning, dark, shifting shapes, swooping and calling at first light, playing their small part in the Resurrection story. It would be a great pity, and a dereliction of duty, if we let swifts slip away now.

Please send me via *The Tablet* any swift nesting sites on religious buildings, and I will collate UK data for the Swift Networks.

■ Mary Colwell is a former BBC natural history producer and a freelance environmental writer and broadcaster.

CHRISTOPHER HOWSE'S PRESSWATCH

'Techno is not really my genre, indeed I'd almost prefer listening to Professor Sandel'



Listeners to BBC Radio 4 have recently been offered a weekly seminar in public philosophy by Professor Michael Sandel from Harvard. Public philosophy means answering questions such as whether it is right to favour applications to university from poor students, or whether to pay people to lose weight. The professor's Socratic approach has been met with delight by some. For me, it brings on physical symptoms: my jaw muscles ache with boredom, as if I had persisted in chewing at lemons.

From the picture produced by British press reports, the Government is embracing a series of policies that sound as if they had been decided halfway through one of Professor Sandel's seminars. Policies are not so much made on the hoof as during a stampede. Anyone would think that the country had not been ruled by statutes and common law for centuries.

A milestone came in 2007, when, all at once, no one could smoke in pubs any more, even in private clubs, and so the unprecedented social habit sprang up of drinkers standing in the rain on the pavement, for the sake of a cigarette. Just as suddenly, workers were hauled up for wearing a cross, landlords sued for deciding which paying guests they didn't want, nurses were bullied into working to facilitate abortions, adoption agencies closed rather than be told which parents to choose, doctors were asked to allow patients' autonomy to bring about their deaths, schools founded to educate a religious minority were expected to give places to the children of those with inimical beliefs. By one clause in this year's Budget, charities were suddenly denied the full value of donors' gifts; by another, churches suddenly had to pay 20 per cent tax on the cost of repairing the roof. Nothing is too serious or too trivial for the state to boss about its citizens.

Under a front-page banner headline, "Britain's vilified Christians", *The Daily Telegraph* last week ran a report of claims by Lord Carey, who was the Archbishop of Canterbury from 1991 to 2002. It

said: "Christians are being 'persecuted' by the courts and 'driven underground' in the same way that homosexuals once were."

The claims were made in a written submission by Lord Carey to the European Court of Human Rights, of which the paper's religious affairs editor, John Bingham, had obtained exclusive sight. *The Daily Mail* picked up the story and ran it on the same day. "Courts in Britain have 'consistently applied equality law to discriminate against Christians,'" the *Telegraph* reported the former archbishop as saying. "They show a 'crude' misunderstanding of the faith by treating some believers as 'bigots'. He writes: 'In a country where Christians can be sacked for manifesting their faith, are vilified by state bodies, are in fear of reprisal or even arrest for expressing their views on sexual ethics, something is very wrong.'"

We shall see what the judges in Strasbourg make of this on 4 September, when they consider the cases of a nurse and an airline worker forced out of their jobs over the wearing of crosses, a therapist sacked for not being willing to take on the counselling of gay couples, and a registrar unwilling to conduct civil partnership ceremonies.

A counterpart to the arbitrary surprises of government policy is the eclectic content of much private religious belief. "The themes of our world are based on God, the Devil, temptation and the loss of Paradise," Darren Cunningham told *The Guardian* last Saturday. "We are the walking dead - there's only one thing that's guaranteed in life, that we're going to die." Mr Cunningham is not a public philosopher but a techno music artist who performs under the name Actress. Techno is not really my genre, indeed I'd almost prefer listening to Professor Sandel. But Mr Cunningham has ideas too.

He produced his first album, *Hazyville*, in 2008. "I was smoking a huge amount of weed," he told Ben Beaumont Thomas, "and working literally from 10 till 10." Since then, he has taken part in an Oxfam project with Damon Albarn (of Blur and the dystopian virtual band Gorillaz) in the Democratic Republic of Congo. This week, Actress' album, *RIP*, came out. One track, "Raven", explores corvine reincarnation. That is not a subject on which the Government has yet brought forward legislation. It could happen any time.

■ Christopher Howse is an assistant editor of *The Daily Telegraph*.