

Migrating Birds

Migration is a long journey carried out by some birds (and some animals) to other areas where they hope to find more food and a warm place to produce their young. Many birds prepare for the journey by eating a lot of food and storing this as fat. Some birds double in weight before they leave to survive the long journey.

Even though young birds will have never made this long journey they still seem to know the route and arrive safely at their new home. Since they do not learn about migration from their parents it is believed that the instinct to migrate was inside them when they were born. It is thought that birds use the position of the sun and the stars to find their way. Birds seem to have an 'internal clock'

which helps them know what time of the day it is and where the sun is at that time. Therefore when they fly to their summer destination they use the sun's position in the sky as a compass. Birds that fly over the sea have no landmarks to guide them on their way and so travel in a straight line. Unfortunately strong winds over the sea during migration may push birds off course causing them to get lost. Birds may fly alone or in large groups and many large birds travel during the day whereas the smaller birds will use the cover of darkness to fly in. Birds also start off their journey on a fine day to give themselves a better chance.

Two birds that travel great distances are the

Arctic tern and the swallow. The Arctic tern lives in the Arctic during the northern summer and then flies south to the Antarctic for the summer down there. The trip there and back is nearly 25,000 miles. Birds that fly that far south have summer all year round. This ensures they will have a good supply of food all year round. Swallows migrate to South Africa several weeks after they are born and some even return in the spring to the exact same nest as the year before. This can be a distance of over 6,000 miles. Two other birds that migrate are the Brent Goose and the Cuckoo. The Brent Goose spends the summer in the Arctic and migrates to Ireland in the winter, whereas the cuckoo migrates here in the spring. This gives them a better chance to find food.



Swallow



Brent Goose



Arctic Tern



Cuckoo

Swallow *Hirundo rustica* Fáinleog

The swallow spends the winter in Africa and then comes to Ireland from April to October. It usually returns to the same nest as the year before. The nest is made of mud and is built on rafters, usually inside barns, out buildings or under bridges. Swallows have a long forked tail; but the female's is slightly shorter than the male's. The swallow is able to drink while it flies by flying low over a river and dipping its bill into the water.

Colour: Blue-black back, wings and top of head, with white belly. Red patch on throat and face.

Length: 17-21 cm

Diet: Flying insects.

Habitat: Low over the ground, rivers and lakes.

Number of eggs: 3-6



Most birds lay only a few eggs so as to be able to look after each chick when they hatch. A cuckoo often lays 12 to 15 eggs, but does so in the nests of other birds so that they will look after her young for her. She waits by a nest until the mother leaves and then flies down and lays her own egg in the nest. She may have to push one of the other eggs out to make room. Usually the new mother treats the young cuckoo as one of her own.

A Cuckoo's Nest?