THE JOHN CRBRAR
LIBRARY @ CHICAGO.
1994
Paper III.—Swallow Lore.

By Lieut. Colonel Thos. Wily.

(Read before the Society, December, 10th, 1869.)

"The Swallow, privileg'd above the rest,  
Of all the birds as man's familiar guest,  
Pursues the sun in summer, brisk and bold,  
But wisely shuns the persecuting cold."

Dryden.

In the subject I have chosen for your entertainment tonight, I hardly hope to afford you any great amount of information, or startle by anything very novel. It is but a small contribution from a humble Member of this Society towards the general stock. If during the summer season, when the regular meetings of the Society are suspended, our Members would devote a little time to observation in the rich field of nature, much useful knowledge might be garnered up for our use and amusement during the winter meetings. It has been truly said by a very keen observer, that "It is by friends kindly unearthing and utilising the information they possess, that valuable facts, which would be otherwise unrecorded, are made public for the benefit of all." And the same writer's words should be the motto of our Society, "Keep your eyes open, your intelligence sharpened; facts, facts, facts, are what we want."

From the title of this paper, you have no doubt already anticipated its subject. I purpose talking to you generally about Swallows. It is in fact Swallow lore gathered from many years' observation of the habits of birds that have always been to me objects of great interest.
Those summer visitors, whose advent we all hail with delight, betokening to us as it does the coming of that glad Spring time, hailed by Spencer with the joyous and exulting shout of "Lord, how all things laughed when they her spyed." The bright cheerful Swallows, how delightful it is after our long winters to hail their return once more, and to watch them darting across the meadows, skimming over the waters, or circling in airy flights round our houses. In man's companionship they delight—Our summer skies would lose much of their beauty and brightness, if those airy denizens were lost to us. With Broderip we heartily concur, when he says, "we welcome their first appearance with delight, as the faithful harbingers and companions of flowery spring, and ruddy summer; and when, after a long frost-bound and boisterous winter, we hear it announced "the Swallows are come, what a train of charming ideas are associated with the simple tidings."

True poets, ever alive to the beautiful in nature, have made ample use of these summer visitors, either to adorn or illustrate their poetry. Our universal bard has, as a matter of course, not neglected them. Who has not in his time mused sadly over those lines where he tells us—

"That true hope is swift, and flies with swallows' wings,
Kings it makes Gods, and meaner creatures Kings."

and where is there to be found a more charming bit of natural history, than his exquisite description of the Martin.

"This guest of summer,
The temple haunting Martlet, does approve,
By his lov'd mansionry, that the heavens' breath,
Smells wooingly here; no jutty, frieze, buttress,
Nor coigne of vantage, but this bird hath made
His pendant bed, and procerant cradle—
Where they most do breed and haunt;
I have observed the air is delicate."

The most pathetic of Beranger's Songs, is the one which he calls "The Swallows." In this song, he depicts a French Soldier, a captive in Morocco, who seeing the returning Swallows, after their
summer visit to his beautiful France, thus apostrophizes them. "O Swallows, I see you once again. Perhaps some of you were hatched under the thatch of that roof where I first saw the day. Tell me of my home. How is my Father? Is my Mother still alive? Perhaps my Sister is married? Speak to me of them, oh speak to me of them." And so he makes him run on through the whole gamut of love, and vain regrets, in a song of infinite beauty and pathos.

Our great living poet, Tennyson, in one of those beautiful songs, which he threads like pearls on the string of his poetry, in the "Princess" makes the little bird love's messenger, in the following strain:

"O Swallow, Swallow, flying, flying south,
Fly to her, and fall upon her gilded eaves,
And tell her, tell her what I tell to thee,
O Swallow, flying from the golden woods,
Fly to her, and pipe and woo her, and make her mine,
And tell her, tell her, that I follow thee."

I could multiply such examples, if it were necessary, as to the favor and esteem in which my little favorites have ever been held by the poets. I have an idea, however it may be but a fanciful one, that the poets of southern climes, where "endless summer reigns," have not the same appreciation of the Swallow, as their more northern and less favored brethren. The coming Swallow is not by them hailed with the same rapture of delight, nor is his departure mourned over with the same fond regret.

This difference may be attributed to various causes, one may be owing to the fact that in warmer climates some of the species are permanent residents. In India, I know this to be the case with several varieties. Another may be, that we northern people, subject to the rigors of a sternier climate, naturally love much these little visitors, whose coming promises relief from the gloom, darkness, and storms of winter. Summer is all before us with its light, and life, and flowers. No southern mind can appreciate this fact with the intensity that we do. Gosse says, "the first Swallow sends a
Thrill through our hearts which is not repeated," and respecting their departure he observes "we cannot divest ourselves of a certain feeling of sadness, because we know that the season is in the decrepitude of age, and is verging towards death."

Homer in the Iliad never once mentions the Swallow, although, excellent naturalist that he was, he has drawn largely on the animal kingdom for simile and illustration. His Warriors are likened to the lordly lion who "with his tail lashes both his flanks and sides as though to rouse his utmost rage." The bird of Jove dashes down from the blue empyrean, and by his mode of flight affords encouragement or otherwise to the combatants. The marshaling of the adverse hosts is likened to the gathering of wild fowl in autumn.

Virgil, in the Eneid, only once mentions the Swallow, where he likens Juturna, wheeling and doubling in her efforts to save her brother Turnus from the pursuing sword of Eneas "to the sable Swallow fluttering about the spacious mansion of some wealthy lord, picking up her scanty fare for her loquacious brood."

The Swallows, Hirundinidae belong to the tribe Fissirostrae, or cleft-billed birds and are divided into two families the Hirundine and Cypseline. They are thus described by naturalists "Birds of this order have the bills very short, much depressed, and very wide at the base; the upper mandible curved at the point; legs short, three toes before, either entirely divided, or connected at the base by a short membrane, the hinder often reversible; claws much hooked; wings long. The flight of these birds is rapid and abrupt, their sight piercing; neck short; throat wide; bill broad; and often gaping for the reception of insects, which constitute their only food."

Latham in his general history of birds, enumerates no less than 55 varieties of the Swallow, and eleven of the sub-tribe of the Swifts, thus giving us a total of 66. But this does not include all, for five varieties of tree Swifts, and some of them most beautiful birds, and the handsome little fairy Martin, all depicted and described by Gould in his magnificent work on Australian birds, do not appear in his list. Neither is a diminutive swift found in India, which con-
struct; its nest on the under sides of the fronds of the palm known as the "tal" or Palmyra palm. Our republican Swallow, and the American Swift are also omitted. This would increase the list to a total of 75. It is not my intention, however, to do more than give you a brief account of the six varieties that visit us here during the Summer season. Some of these making their appearance early in April, while all have generally disappeared by the end of August. Only four varieties visit the British Isles.

First in order, as he is the first to appear, is the "Hirundo bicolor" or "White Bellied Swallow." I noticed him first last spring on the 11th April, at the Rideau Bridge, about which several were then flying. This bird is thus described. "Upper plumage blue black, richly glossed with dark sea green, the blue tint predominating in some lights, and the green in others; wings and tail blackish brown, the tertials, spurious quills, and greater coverts having a slight marginal gloss of blue green. The whole under plumage, from the chin downwards is pure white. Ear blue green. Bill black. Feet brown.

This very pretty bird, in its mode of flight, and general appearance strongly resembles the "Hirundo urbica" of Europe, of which, from imperfect comparisons, it was long considered but a variety. It is quite as common to our cities, as it is in the country, and may be seen continually darting through the streets, or skimming round our dwellings during the season. Fond of man's society, it nests and brings up its young in his neighbourhood, wherever it finds a spot suitable for its purposes. A favorite resort of theirs is between the clap-boarding, and the inner walls of framed dwellings, to which they find access by some handy knot-hole, and into which they will dart and disappear with astonishing celerity. One pair has nested with great regularity for the last three years, in a small framed dwelling opposite to my house in Daly Street. I do not know whether it is always the same pair, but I have little doubt that it is. Another pair selected another framed dwelling having the convenient knot-hole, just behind the gaol. I noticed also that a pair had a nest last Summer in the wall of the eastern departmental block. The aper-
ture by which the birds found access to the nest was so small, as not to be detected by the naked eye from below. Their sudden disappearance on their frequent visits to their young, apparently melting as it were into the solid wall, used to have a curious effect, their vanishing was so instantaneous as almost to make you doubt the evidence of your senses. The nests of this variety are not the elaborate constructions that are built by others of the family, but are simply made of straw, and hay, or such light materials, lined with a few feathers. In these generally about four eggs are deposited.

A pair during the past Summer, built in a small box that I had provided for them in my yard, and brought up a brood there. It was very interesting to watch their proceedings when the young family claimed their care. The number of insects daily consumed was extraordinary. One evening I counted fifteen visits with food made within an hour. I noticed also that the male bird generally waited the coming of his mate, for a little dalliance before he vacated the premises; the female bird never lost any time, and was always off for a fresh supply, as soon as she had fed her young. Their periods of greatest activity were in the early morning, and in the evening until dark. Like the Swallow tribe generally, all their domestic avocations were performed without the slightest fear or apprehension. After the young brood had departed, a pair of House Wrens took possession of the box, and brought up a brood which remained about the house until late in September.

This variety of Swallow is peculiar to this continent, and it frequents its woody districts up as far as the 60th parallel. Audubon, who has traced its migrations throughout the year, saw them every day during the winter season, in the neighbourhood of New Orleans. The flocks being largest when the wind blew from the sea. Many retiring in the evening to roost in holes about houses, the greater number resorting to Lakes, and spending the night amongst the branches of the candleberry myrtle. With us it takes its departure early. After the first of August, I missed them altogether. Its once supposed European congener differs in this respect. White of
Selborne mentions, in his charming natural history of that place, that they remained there until about the middle of September, but that some staid until the middle of October, and on one occasion he observed a pair even as late as the 3rd November. Others have been seen as late as the 8th December. He further mentions that before migrating, they were generally in the habit of assembling in vast flocks on the banks of rivers, resorting at night to the osier beds to roost.

The next of our visitors is the "Hirundo purpurea" or purple martin, the "sashun peeshew" of the Cree Indians.

Color pure and glossy violet purple; quills, greater coverts, and tail pitch black, faintly reflecting purple. Lores velvet black; Bill and legs pitch black. Female a sober brownish hue.

This beautiful, bold, and active Swallow, has a very extensive range on this continent, on which alone it is to be found. It has been seen at Pernambuco, 8½ degrees south of the equator, and it travels as far north as the Arctic circle, which it reaches earlier than any of its tribe. It is only absent from this portion of the continent for a short period during mid-winter. "Audubon states that it reaches New Orleans on its journey northwards about the latter end of January, and it has been seen at the Great Bear Lake on the 17th May. I first noticed them here on the 23rd of last April. It preys altogether on the larger sized insects, such as wasps, bees, beetles, and dragon flies.

Every one must be familiar with this bird, for it boldly takes possession of every available hole or cranny about our houses, that can be made available for nesting purposes. The nest, like that of the "Hirundo bicolor" being very inartistic in its construction, and adapted to the holes they find. Its loud and not unmusical cry is one of the most familiar sounds in our streets, and may be heard unceasingly from "early morn until dewy eve." In holes under eave spouts, but more generally in houses specially provided for their accommodation, they breed and bring up their families unmolested. They fearlessly attack, and drive away hawks, cats, and other predatory interlopers, and in this respect by their loud warning
caries, are useful in the farm yard. A favorite resort of theirs is the old Rideau Hotel. So is a very spacious house, that has been provided for them, in Sparks Street. It was very interesting to watch them at these places during the busy season of incubation. How very active the male bird became. How loud and incessant was his "yeop, yeop." And what a general uproar prevailed in the community on every fresh arrival. The din of bird talk was incessant.

So eminently is this bird the friend and companion of man, that even "the wild untutored Indian" of the west prepares for his coming. The Choctaws and other tribes hang up empty gourds on forked sticks for their accommodation near their wigwams. None ever dream of molesting him, hence doubtless his bold and fearless demeanour. He leaves us later than the previous Swallow. I noticed them last flying about the city on the 29th August. Audubon relates a curious fact in connection with this bird. A large colony that frequented a Martin house near Boston, were one spring entirely destroyed by a "cold snap," after their spring arrival; since then none have ever reappeared there, and the empty tenement was taken possession of and retained by a colony of the "Hirundo bicolor."

A favorite resort of theirs, prior to their autumnal migration was the topmost branches of a dead hemlock on Major's Hill. On its withered top they would sit in noisy conclave day after day. Discussing probably the season's operations, or debating their approaching departure and route. I have often thought, as I watched them, what an advantage it would have been to possess the bird-lore of Asylas "who understood the language of all birds;" or to have been the possessor of that rare ring, sent to the King of Sarra by the King of Arabia, "by the vertue whereof" his daughter understood "the language of all fowls." What an invaluable member I should have become to this Society.

Our next is the "Hirundo Americana" or "Barn Swallow." The forehead, throat, and upper part of the breast of this bird is a pale chestnut, rest of the under plumage of a yellowish brown. The top of the head and back is deeply tinted with violet purple; the
base of the plumage being grey, the middle part greyish white, and pitch black next the purple tips. Tail blackish brown, with dark green reflexions, and very much forked. Bill black. Legs blackish purple.

This very graceful and active bird, is by far the most beautiful of any of its tribe. Audubon says that it is identical with the European Hirundo rustica, and no doubt it is; its appearance, habits, and modes of nidification being nearly similar. Hence I cannot understand its peculiar nomenclature as the Hirundo Americana. Nearly two thousand years ago, Virgil had noted its mode of building its nest. In the 4th Georgie he speaks of the time “before the chattering Swallow suspends her nest upon the rafters.” In this country as well as the old one, the habits of the bird are still the same, excepting that with us it never builds in chimneys, while the European variety frequently does. Here there is hardly a barn in the country, in which one or more of them do not suspend their nests to the rafters. Their favorite spot being generally under the ridge pole, the base of the nest supported by the long wooden pin which holds the pinnacles of the rafters together—like the first specimen nest on the table, which you will observe is small and cup shaped. Others are occasionally placed against, and adhering to the sides of the rafters, without any such support, like the other specimen nest, which you will observe, is much larger, and is spread out laterally for strength and support. The latter nest weighs about two pounds, and generally takes about seven days to construct. It is built of tempered clay, mixed with a little hay or straw to ensure adhesion, and has a lining of soft warm feathers. Building is generally carried on in the morning, work being suspended during the rest of the day, so that the nest may obtain the necessary consistence, before a fresh course of mud pellets is laid.

The nesting habits of the Hirundo rustica of Europe are very curious. It will build not only indiscriminately in chimneys, shafts of mines, on the rafters of large buildings, under the arches of bridges, but also in other odd and out of the way places. A pair once built a nest in the body of a dead owl nailed against a barn. After the depart-
ture of the brood the nest and owl were removed, and are now in the museum of Sir Ashton Lever. The dead owl was replaced by a Conch Shell, and in this a nest was constructed the following spring. Both nest and shell are now in the British Museum. Another pair built a nest in a picture frame at Canneton Hall, near Bath, to which they had gained access by a broken pane of glass. Another pair, by the same mode, gained access to a chest of drawers, and built a nest in one of the empty drawers, the possession of which they afterwards disputed with its lawful owner; while another pair—of all places in the world—chose the handle of a pair of garden shears for this purpose. In Sweden, where they built almost exclusively in barns, they are called the "luda swala," or barn swallow, as they are commonly called in this country.

I found, last summer, a colony of six pairs of these birds in a large barn near Billings’ Bridge, and it was most interesting to watch their proceedings while building, or at a later period, when occupied with their young broods. All their movements were so graceful and quick, as they flitted to and fro overhead in the barn, or darted out of it through ever so small a chink or hole, with the quickness of a flash, that I never tired watching them. While so engaged they were perfectly silent, not like their noisy cousins, the Purple Martins. I visited that barn so often last summer—it is very conspicuous on the side of the hill from the Bridge—that I am afraid very grave suspicions must have been excited amongst the neighbors as to my intentions. The consequence might have been serious to me, had the barn accidentally burned down, after one of those periodical visits.

No swallow has a quicker flight than this beautiful one; “his daring sweeps, and effortless undulations, are striking objects in a cloudless sky.” Audubon says that he can do his mile a minute. Whether flitting over the meadows in long undulating sweeps and curves; skimming gracefully over the surface of the water, in which he occasionally delights to have his breast, or sip the water as he flies to slake his thirst; or throwing himself by sudden bound
SWALLOW LORE.

high up in the air; his every motion is the perfection of beauty and grace; "A thing of joy forever." A very favorite resort of theirs is Billings' Bridge, and its neighborhood. I know nothing pleasanter of a fine summer's afternoon, than to stand on it, and watch their airy gambols. Its range on this continent is very extensive; it has been found as far north as Fort Good Hope, in latitude 67 3/4, and builds there in store-houses belonging to the Hudson Bay Company. They remain with us later than the two first mentioned. I saw a pair worrying a hawk on the Chelsea road on the 1st September last.

Another of our visitors is the "Hirundo fulva"—"Cliff or Republican Swallow." Color—Top of the head and back black, glossed with violet purple. Chin, throat, bright brownish red, with a collar of greyish brown; wings and tail blackish brown, with a greenish gloss; belly white; breast and flanks brownish grey. Male and female are alike.

This interesting and sociable little bird is the congener—in its mode of nesting—of the "Hirundo urbica" of Europe—"the temple haunting Martlet" of Shakespeare, although it differs from it altogether in plumage. On this continent its range is very extensive. Its nests have been seen clustered on the faces of the cliffs, on the barren grounds of the far north, and it has been found throughout the whole course of the Slave and McKenzie rivers. Curiously enough they only made their first appearance at Fort Chepewyan, where they had never been seen before, on the 25th June, 1825. This being the first known instance, of their having taken up their abode with man, north of the Great Lakes. From Fort Chepewyan they had all disappeared by the 14th July.

Here their "procreant cradles," with the curious tubular entrance, not inaptly likened to the broken neck of a retort, are common enough, and may be found under the eaves of churches, barns, or other large buildings. From the gregarious habits of these birds they usually live in colonies, and their nests may always be seen clustered together, sometimes in great numbers. The knowing looks
of the occupants, as they peer down on an intruder from their "coigne of vantage," has in it something very comical. Their note is a gentle soft twittering, which when alarmed, they change to a sharp and angry cry.

I found many colonies of them in this neighbourhood last Summer. One very large one, under the eaves of a barn on the Chelsea road, not far from that village. At this place they were very busy on the 27th May. The largest number I ever saw congregated together in one spot, was at the Hawkesbury mills. Here their nests were literally in hundreds, and the birds were in thousands thick as "motes in a sunbeam." Like the Barn Swallow, this busy little Architect has prudence and foresight enough to intermit his work, so as to allow the material already deposited to dry and harden. Communistic in their habits, they work many of them together in the construction of their nests. This is never done by the Barn Swallow. It has been said that these birds void a glutinous secretion while fastening their mud pellets. I can find no trace of this in their nests. Where they are protected from the weather, they will last for many years. The beautiful little fairy Martin of Australia, constructs its nest after a precisely similar fashion. The European bird is much troubled by an interloper, from which ours is, as yet, free. Those impudent varlets, the House Sparrows, watch patiently until the shell of the nest is completed, and then uncivilly ejecting the rightful owners, fit it up for their own use and benefit.

"The good old rule, sufficing them, the simple plan,
That they should take who have the power,
And they should keep who can."

The distress of the ejected tenants when this occurs is very great, and their clamours are loud and incessant. I saw the last of these birds here on the 21st August. There are some strange superstitious notions prevalent with respect to the "Martin." Here, and at home its coming and building about a house are considered as signs of
good luck; whereas at the Faroe Isles, which it seldom visits, its unwonted appearance is looked upon with dread, as foreshadowing famine and pestilence.

Next follows the "Hirundo riparia," the Bank or Sand Martin, the "Shee, shee, winay peshow," of the Cree Indians. The upper parts of this bird are mouse colored; lower white; tail forked; lores and bill black; claws fine, pointed and very sharp. Wings and tail darker than the body—very little difference between male and female.

The Sand Martin appears to be universal in its range. Chateaubriand says, that it is the only one of the Swallow tribe, that is to be found in all the four quarters of the globe. It is said to breed in Egypt during its winter migration. It is the smallest of the six varieties which visit us, and is familiar to us all. From the open and easily accessible places in sand banks in which it nests, it becomes particularly exposed to the mischievous propensities of boys, and is much persecuted by them during the period of incubation, hence it has been driven from many places that it formerly frequented. They have abandoned Sandy Hill altogether.

I visited a colony of them on the high banks of the Rideau river, near the Hog'sback on the 11th July last. On uncovering one of their subterranean galleries at that place, I found in it four young birds, nearly full fledged. The gallery which conducted to the nest, was about two feet long, and turned off at about eighteen inches from the entrance, at an obtuse angle to the right. At its extremity, in a circular cup-like depression, was the nest, comfortably lined with soft goose feathers. The temperature of the nest I found very high. The birds which did not seem easily disturbed, were flitting in and out of their holes, all the time I was about them. As many as five and six sometimes making their exit from one hole. A friend who was with me caught a bird as it came out of one from which many had previously departed. For such small and apparently feeble birds, the labour entailed on them in the construction of their galleries must be very great indeed—and the quantity of soil which they ex-
cavate is very considerable, their bills serving the same purpose as a navy's pick. Their galleries are all constructed with a slight upward incline, to facilitate the discharge of water, or rather I should say, to prevent its running into their nests during rains. I saw four flying about the Hog'sback on the 29th August, and these were the last that I saw.

I observed a very large colony of these birds at Lyn, near Brockville, in an extensive ballast pit on the line of the Grand Trunk Railway. At this place they were extremely busy on the 4th June last. On this continent the Sand Martin has a more northerly range than any of its congers, being very numerous throughout the fur countries, wherever banks suitable for its nests are to be found. They are stated to frequent in thousands the mouth of the McKenzie river in the 68th parallel of latitude. Its note is a very gentle and soft twitter, and when hawking about in search of food, it is generally seen doing so in numbers together. It is seldom seen alone, or in pairs like others of the Swallow family, they are also somewhat communistic in their habits like the Republican Swallow.

The last of our Summer visitors, though not the least interesting from its singular habits, and our want of knowledge respecting many of them, is the Swift, the "Cypselus Americanus" or "Chimney Swallow," not inaptly so called, either from its dusky sooty color, or its choice of chimneys for nidification. Equally appropriate is its French name of "Ramoneur."

Its general color is a dark brown, or rather a sooty black, of a lighter shade underneath than on the back or wing coverts. Wings long, and scythe shaped. Bill short, upper mandible curved at the point, legs short—three toes before, one behind reversible—claws much hooked, tail feathers subulate, or having spiky terminations to the stems of the tail feathers, similar to those of the Woodpecker.

The power of flight of these birds is prodigious. They are never seen perched, or at rest, but are continually on the wing from 4 a.m. until 8 p. m., an incessant flight of sixteen hours duration. As an instance of the wonderful power of wing of this family of the Swal-
low tribe, I may here mention that a straggler of one of its varieties, the "Acanthylus caudacuta" of Australia, never found any where excepting on that continent and the islands of the eastern Archipelago, was found dead in England in the year 1849; the only known instance of one ever having been seen in Europe. What a marvelous flight of 18,000 miles.

Here in Ottawa, the Swifts are particularly noteworthy, from the fact of their having established a roosting place in one of the ventilating shafts of the eastern departmental buildings, to which they may be seen resorting in countless numbers every evening, from their first appearance up to their final departure; that is, from the first week in May to the first week of September. On the 6th August last I first observed that a large flock had swarmed off from the parent colony, and had taken possession of another of the ventilating shafts in the western block. On examining the shafts on the following day, I was satisfied that they had not been long in possession, from the small quantity of exuviae deposited. This fresh roosting place was occupied by the new colony until they took their leave, which I noticed was somewhat earlier than that of the parent establishment. I noticed none at the new place after the 25th August, while they continued to frequent the old spot, although in continually decreasing numbers, until the 5th September, when I saw the last, a solitary bird. After that I saw no others.

Nothing is more singular about this bird, than its gregarious habit of assembling in vast flocks at some favorite roosting place. To this locality, towards bed time, they may be seen trooping from all points of the compass, not as "single spies, but in whole battalions." What becomes of them all during the day time, is not so clear. Some 15 years ago, when I was living at Sherbrooke, (I rode my hobby then, as you will perceive,) I discovered, and first directed public attention to a roosting place of theirs situated in a large hollow elm tree, which grew on a rising ground overlooking the town. To this tree they resorted in vast numbers every evening, and it became quite celebrated as the natural curiosity of the place, unfor-
TRANSACTIONS.

Unfortunately so, as far as the birds were concerned, as the sequel will show.

This tree was a very large one, one of the ancient Anakim of the primeval forest. Near its withered and decayed top, which had but a very slight crown of verdure, a large limb had been broken off, thus exposing the hollow trunk by a vertical slit of about two feet in length, by a few inches in width. Into this opening every evening, after their usual manœuvres, and gyrations round the tree top, they would pour in a continued stream. Being curious to know if the tree still existed, and continued occupied by the swifts, I wrote to a friend during the past summer, making the necessary enquiries. I will read you an extract from his letter in reply, by which you will see that the poor birds’ fame, brought them their destruction.

SHERBROOKE, June 3rd.

Dear Col. Wily—

"In answer to your inquiries about the Swallow tree, I regret to say that some Goth or Fenian, with devilish wickedness, cut a large hole in the trunk of the tree some years since, filled the hole with straw, set fire to it, and smoked the poor Swallows out of house and home. There was at the time an awful amount of indignation in town, and a reward offered, but the blackguard was never discovered. It is sinful, I know, to harbour unholy thoughts about any poor sinner, but if that particular sinner has not repented of his cowardly act, then I will say, may the D——l roast him. God forgive me. The poor birds left in disgust, and have never been seen since. The tree is cut down, and the place that knew it knows it no more."

The Swifts seem remarkably sensitive to sudden atmospheric changes. On the 26th May last, I had risen early to note the hour that they left the roosting place in the morning. This they commenced doing at 4 o’clock, in twos and threes at a time; it had been broad daylight for sometime previous. At that hour the weather was warm and moist, after a slight thunder shower during the night. Before nine o’clock one of our sudden falls in
temperature had taken place, and the weather had become very chilly. At that time I examined the roosting place, and found it swarming with the birds that had returned to it for shelter and warmth. They were clinging to the walls on the inside of the airshaft in countless numbers. There they were clustered many deep for a distance of twelve or fourteen feet from its summit. Very restless they were too, dropping off and flitting about, and then again resettling themselves on the thick clusters of those that remained clinging to the walls. Others lower down, and out of the crowd, were busy preening their feathers, which, when they had completed to their satisfaction, they would crawl up the side of the walls and rejoin the others. It was the most curious and interesting sight I ever beheld. I invariably noticed afterwards, that whenever the weather was cold and wet, the swifts, like wise birds, stayed at home. I have known them to remain within for two whole days, and part of a third, during which period they must, of course, have been wholly without food.

It is a curious question, and one not easily answered, as to the sexes of the birds that resort to the roosting places. I obtained three living specimens from the Eastern Block. Mr. Couper, on dissection, pronounced them all males. Audubon relates that out of a hollow sycamore which they frequented, and which he calculated contained about 9,000 birds, he once took at night one hundred and twenty specimens, and amongst these he only found six females, eighty-seven were adult males, the rest being young birds; sex unknown. He also says that when roosting they do not cling on each other. I am quite satisfied that those which roost here do, for I have observed them many deep by the aid of a good glass. This habit is also shared in by others of the species. Gould relates that the "Artamus sordidus," or Wood Swallow of Australia, has the singular habit of suspending itself to the branches of the trees in great numbers, and describes these clusters as being sometimes as big as a bushel measure.

About the latter end of June and the beginning of July, it seemed
to me that the numbers resorting to the roosting place had somewhat diminished, and that there were not so many as in the earlier part of the season, and again, as at a somewhat later period. About the middle of June, I noticed many pairs flying about the dead trees on the Major's Hill, apparently with some object; that object was made plain to me on the 21st, when I noticed one bird particularly busy flying up amongst the dead twigs, apparently trying to break them off. After several unsuccessful efforts, it at last succeeded, and flew off with its prize, dropping itself gently down the chimney in Garth's building, Rideau street, where doubtless the nest was.

You will observe that the specimen nests now on the table, are entirely composed of small twigs, broken off trees in the manner I have described. The materials are glued together by a secretion voided by the little architect. The nest itself is a beautiful specimen of bird architecture.

"What nice hand,
With twenty years apprenticeship to boot,
Will make me such another."

It is not large, but still large enough to hold the family, if not more numerous than that of its English congener, commonly known as the "Deviling," which never builds in chimneys. White says that it never lays more than two eggs. Audubon says that the American variety lays four. It is said that if the young, by mischance fall from the nest, they have the faculty of creeping up to it again, and that they crawl up to the chimney tops, previous to their being able to fly, and are there fed by the parent birds. I am unable to say whether the nest is lined with feathers or not. If it is not, the callow young must be about as uncomfortable in it, as St. Lawrence was on his gridiron, minus the fire. The specimens I have procured, were obtained, one from the chimney of a house in Murray Street, the other from the chimney of the Billings farm house.

We know that many of these birds build in chimneys. Do they all do so? I am inclined to think not, from the small numbers that are seen about the city during the day. Excepting a few pairs,
the great bulk of them are absent until about 4 o'clock, when they may be seen returning in greater or lesser numbers. Sometimes I have seen them very thick about the Suspension Bridge and the Falls, at other times I have failed to see one. On the 27th May, I saw a solitary pair hawking about old Chelsea, and I did not see another one the whole day, although I travelled over a considerable extent of country. I happened to be at Brockville twice last summer, and I there noticed the swifts in much greater numbers about the town during the day, than I had ever seen them in Ottawa. I never heard of any common roosting place in that neighbourhood, although I made inquiries. Many of the Brockville birds may perhaps resort here to roost. Who can say that they do not.

While hawking for food, they fly high, as if what they existed on, had to be sought for in a higher strata of the atmosphere than is the case with the other swallows. On one occasion, and that occasion only, I saw them skimming over the surface of the Rideau River, in company with the barn and common swallow. The day was warm and close, after a thunder storm—what is commonly known as a "muggy day." Our swift is smaller than its European congener, whose wings have a stretch of 14 inches, ours do not exceed 11. Although the European bird does not roost in common like our bird, it has the same habit of congregating together in the evening, coursing and playing with loud shrieks round steeples, towers, and other high buildings. Both have a common habit when flying, of throwing up their wings over their backs. White says they do this to mute. He also tells us that "all swallows are very much annoyed by dipterous insects, the "Hippobosca hirundinis," which infest every species, and are so large in proportion to the swallows, that they must be extremely irksome and injurious to them." Mr. Couper found the swifts which he prepared for me, covered with these insects.

I notice generally that the swallows leave us in their autumnal migration, much earlier than their congeners do in England. Some quit us early in August, and by the end of the month all have disappeared, excepting the Swifts, which singularly enough are the first
to leave in England. White says that by the 12th August they have all departed, while with us they are to be seen to the end of the first week in September. Swallows are sometimes found very late in England; one was killed in Yorkshire in 1843, on the 10th December, and many instances are on record, of Martins being seen in the first week of December. This finding of stray birds, long after the departure of the main army, has led to much discussion on the subject of the brumal hybernation of Swallows, so long firmly believed in—more particularly in northern Europe. It was asserted there that they retired to the bottom of pools, or ponds, where like toads and frogs, they remained torpid during the dreary season of winter. So undoubtedly was this myth accepted as a fact, that a Swedish Calendar noted the 22nd September, as the day on which "Hirundo submergitur," just as one might talk about fowls going to roost. It is not, however, surprising that such a belief should have long prevailed, when we find men like Linneus and Cuvier holding by it. The latter says on this subject: "It is well authenticated that they (the Swallows) fall into a lethargic state during winter, and even that they pass that season at the bottom of marshy waters." A professor of Botany at Leipsic, named Etmuller, writing about them says:—"I remember to have found more than a bushel would hold of Swallows closely clustered together among the reeds of a fish pond under the ice, all of them to appearance dead, but with the heart still pulsating." Another learned Doctor speaks just as positively to having seen them taken out of the Lake Rumrodt; and Gosse informs us that "the Academy of Upsal in Sweden, received as an undoubted fact, the winter immersion of Swallows." The sacred writers were wiser in this respect, Jeremiah tells us. "Yea, the stork knoweth her appointed times; and the turtle, and the crane, and the swallow observe the time of their coming."

It is difficult to conceive how such a belief could ever have prevailed, that consigned for six months of the year, to a cold and watery grave, the bright and joyous creatures who so delight in the balmy
air and the bright sunshine. The want of them in our clear skies, and the still hazy sunshine of our "Fall" days, makes the air seem to me such a solitude, as to produce a saddening and somewhat depressing effect, foreshadowing as it does so surely that season when "Winter comes to rule the varied year, sullen and sad."

In conclusion, let us think one moment, of the marvellous instinct which guides these wise little creatures so unerringly, in their periodical migrations. While man, with all his boasted reason, was painfully creeping along the shores of his domain, or timidly stretching across its bays, from one headland to another; these birds, needing no mariner's compass to guide them, excepting the one they carried in their heads, were winging their way through the trackless air, or over the pathless seas, guided by that wonderful instinct, the gift of their Divine Creator who taught them to know "the time of their coming" and who thinks,—

"Of all things both great and small;  
For the dear God who loveth us  
He made and loveth all."