

# **Follow the Swallow**

**John Bonthron and Kareth Paterson**

*This story is for Duncan MacFarlane, a kindly and generous man and his clever wife, Jean, two people who love nature and wild things.*

*The original story was penned around 2010  
2<sup>nd</sup> Edition 2020*

## Foreword

*The 25<sup>th</sup> March was a soft, dull day, with clouds of the finest drizzle pulsing on a fickle little breeze. The midges and other insects were hatching furiously. The trout were sipping and splashing. A perfect day to be on Craigallian Loch.*

*Still protected while sitting in the car, I put on my midge net then applied a generous helping of 'Skin so Soft'<sup>1</sup> to exposed parts of my corpus. Only then did I dare make my way to the old wooden boathouse, laden with my fishing gear, electric outboard and heavy battery. I reminded myself of those tiny donkeys I had seen years ago in Morocco, over-burdened but resilient, scrabbling on sharp hooves over sun-baked rocks. Not for the first time, I scolded myself for the depth of my addiction to the paraphernalia of fly-fishing. I also had my lunch bag with two flasks of strong, brownish coffee and, in a clip-top box, along with my lime green 'Spork'<sup>2</sup>, a healthy tuna salad. This bag was also hiding two dark-chocolate Bounty Bars and a grab-bag of Walkers' Salt and Vinegar crisps. These last three items were illicit booty, not permitted, according to my wife-controlled menu. To sin is human. To plan to sin is devious, possibly evil.*

*Over breakfast, I had entered into several pacts regarding future shopping trips and outings to places of interest, thus gaining permission for this visit. A full day of bliss beckoned.*

*From the footpath alongside the loch, a narrow pier gave access to the years-old boathouse. After unlocking the door and peering in, I grinned. All four boats, their anchors and landing nets already in place, were bobbing cheerily, two on either side of the central jetty, made of planking, most of which was now rather rickety. The interior of the building was small and the structure old, beginning to crumble in places. There was talk of it being replaced, perhaps at a new spot nearer the track which led up through the estate. There was always talk of such improvements but I had kept my head down.*

*I love this old place just as it is, as do my swallows.*

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<sup>1</sup> *Skin so Soft* made by Avon is widely used throughout the Highlands and Islands of Scotland to protect against midges, voracious wee beasties who have ruined many a holiday for the unsuspecting tourist.

<sup>2</sup> A *Spork* is an eating tool which combines a spoon, fork and serrated cutting edge as a knife. Visit *Tiso Stores* at [www.tiso.com](http://www.tiso.com)

## Brooding

Fiona raised her wing a little as Enrico screeched his approach. Malcolm, first to hatch, instinctively pushed his tiny, bald head out from beneath the brood patch of his mother's warm body, into the dimness of the boathouse and opened his beak as far as possible while making little squawking hunger noises. Instinct had told him his first fast-food meal was about to be delivered. Over the next hour, his father's visits repeated and soon the little swallow felt much stronger.

With his chick now satisfied, Enrico landed on the ledge beside the nest. Both parents chattered excitedly to each other then, without warning, Fiona pressed her little feet hard down on Malcolm, rousing him from a contended sleep. He automatically opened his gape as wide as he could, expecting another tasty morsel but, this time, Enrico shuffled on to the nest, wiggled into a comfortable position then settled on top of his son and three unhatched, eggs. His father chirruped continuously. Malcolm, warm and cosy, responded with little cheep-cheeps but was soon lulled to sleep by the soothing burble of his father's song.

While Fiona was incubating her clutch of eggs, Enrico had, at times, perched outside on the roof, singing to her. He had also kept the nest warm while she hunted for food or skimmed the loch to both drink and clean her breast feathers. Now the pair had successfully produced a healthy chick.

ooOoo

The previous year, returning from her first migration to and from South Africa, Fiona had flown into the building but her mother, Morag, was already nesting and had scolded her daughter away. Fiona had failed to mate that year so had no need of a nest but over the months of her first adult summer at Craigallian, the little bird had never been alone or lonely. There were lots of other single swallows, house martins and some swifts for company. From dawn to dusk, they all flew in loose squadrons, swirling and turning to snap many varieties of insects from the air, before dipping and sipping from the loch's surface.

1        Each night, as the sun dropped below the hills, Fiona had roosted in the Big  
2 Tree near the Craigallian Fire<sup>3</sup>, a memorial to the men who met there during the  
3 years of the Great Depression between the two World Wars. While the breeding  
4 couples sat on their nests, keeping chicks and eggs warm, she had perched with the  
5 other singleton swallows. Often, none of them slept. Instead, they chirruped and  
6 sang through the short, summer nights, well fed and bursting with energy.

7        It was while roosting in the Big Tree, Fiona was told how important it was to  
8 find a mate while in South Africa or on the route home and to set off early for the  
9 loch, to be sure of a good nesting site. She was warned about Black Eric the Mink  
10 who could climb, find your nest then eat your eggs and chicks. She also learned she  
11 must stay away from the shallower edges of the loch when swooping for a drink  
12 because this was where Bernie the Big Pike lived.

13        When the end of summer arrived, the swallows of Craigallian Loch began  
14 gathering in large flocks, twittering with excitement. Built-in instincts were  
15 programmed to encourage them to leave the place of their birth and journey to a land  
16 far, far away, where it would still be summer and there would be plenty food for  
17 everyone.

18        One bright morning in late August, with hundreds of other swallows for  
19 company, Fiona took to the skies for her first flight to the other side of the world.  
20 After joining with other flocks as they travelled due south, by the time they crossed  
21 from Europe, across the Mediterranean Sea to Africa, there were many thousands  
22 chattering and chittering about their adventure, eager to reach their destination.

23        On the African continent, after a night's rest near the eastern border of  
24 Morocco, followed by a good feed in the early dawn light, they continued south, the  
25 first-time youngsters unaware of two hazards which could not be avoided. An inbuilt  
26 sense had prepared every bird for the first of these; crossing the vast Sahara Desert  
27 with its heat and lack of both food and water. This epic flight, lasting two days, would  
28 be completed without landing. Their instincts had told them they must be in peak  
29 condition and if not, they might become of one the birds who would die from  
30 exhaustion or starvation during this part of the journey. Fiona, like the others,  
31 ensured she was well fed and groomed and confident she had the stamina to

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<sup>3</sup> Craigallian Fire. See <http://www.carbethhutters.co.uk/code/craigallian.html>

1 undertake the challenge before setting out. In the early dawn light, the swallows  
2 rose skyward in swirling clouds of wings and headed south.

3 Two full days later, although tired, dusty and hungry by the time she and  
4 almost every bird in her flock had successfully crossed the ocean of sand to reach a  
5 river in which to wash and sip water droplets, Fiona was proud of her achievement.  
6 After an overnight stop to sleep and regain their energy, again they took to the air,  
7 only landing at dusk in a traditionally used safe place in which to preen and sleep.

8 The second, and intensely horrifying hazard was one for which no swallow  
9 was ever prepared. This took place after the majority of the flock had landed for the  
10 night at Ebok Boje, in Western Nigeria, a major and traditional stopping off and  
11 roosting spot, used annually by millions of European swallows during their migration  
12 south. Here, when the cloud of birds landed to roost in the tall elephant grasses at  
13 dusk, local humans, who had been lying in wait, nets spread to catch birds as they  
14 landed, captured, killed, cooked then feasted on thousands night after night.  
15 Feasting was followed by celebrations, singing and dancing throughout the hours of  
16 darkness. Fiona had managed to avoid capture after escaping through a hole in the  
17 net and forced her body to waddle and shuffle as far away from the frightening  
18 noises as she could. Finding a space between two boulders, she cowered there for  
19 the remainder of the night, away from the panic, shrieks and screams of terrified  
20 birds plus the awful smell of cooking which gave her nightmares for days before  
21 fading from her mind. She had no idea this was an annual event of great celebration  
22 for the local people of the area. Her night was spent cowering, alone and frightened,  
23 as far from the carnage as possible.

24 A few weeks later, no longer carrying the memory of past traumas, she and  
25 her companions arrived in South Africa after their twelve-week journey. Now she  
26 had two months, in the African summer, to moult, mature, cross paths with other  
27 swallows who had travelled from all over Europe and soar above the land for the  
28 pure pleasure of flying and feasting in mid air. She knew this would be her  
29 opportunity to find a mate and hoped to find one from Craigallian Loch.

30

## Going Home

During her return from South Africa to Scotland, Fiona flew in the company of many thousands of swallows, all heading back to Europe. Despite not having found a partner, she felt the pull of home and joined other female birds on their migration. Most of the mated male birds had left before their females to establish nesting sites or refurbish a previously used nest. Not having a mate, Fiona knew she would be returning as a singleton.

After leaving South Africa, now in the middle of a flock, all catching food in flight, Fiona flew high above the Congo rainforests, over Cameroon and Nigeria then the dry expanse of Niger. As before, the little birds only landed at the end of each day to bathe, drink, preen then sleep when the sun began setting. Approaching the southern side of the immense Sahara Desert the, now massive, flocks again faced their greatest challenge; the ever-expanding desert. Searing heat, lack of food and water again took its toll of the less fit but the majority landed safely in Morocco. Fiona, like everyone else, was exhausted by the time they reached an oasis where they could quench their thirst and clean their feathers. After bathing and preening, she joined the others to sleep in a copse of almost leafless trees.

The following morning, now energised, flock after flock took off in great clouds of whirring wings, up into the blue sky to head north, over Morocco, crossing the Straits of Gibraltar then heading up the centre of Spain, all the while catching food in flight, only landing at the end of each day to chatter, bathe, preen and roost. Fiona, along with many other swallows, then broke away to fly northeast, toward the Spanish coast.

During their overnight stop in Barcelona, Fiona roosted beside a swallow she had not met before and was impressed by his long, symmetrical tail. When he noticed her interest, he spread his wings and sang to her. Such a beautiful song, Fiona was smitten. His name was Enrico and Barcelona was his home. He asked her to stay and become his partner but the pull of Craigallian Loch was too great and, after telling him why that area was so special, with heavy heart, she turned him down. Enrico sang a sad little song to her while she nestled into him to offer comfort and warmth in the cool evening.

1           The following morning, as the sun rose, the birds prepared to fly north. Fiona  
2 looked at Enrico, chirruped one last time then headed up, up, up into the clear sky  
3 for the next day's journey. Once again feeding on the wing, she soared and swooped  
4 to catch sun-warmed insects but always, at the back of her mind, was the memory of  
5 Enrico and his beautiful love song.

6           When dusk approached, the flock descended, twisting and turning as they  
7 looked for safe places to roost overnight. She found herself with several Craigallian  
8 swallows and after attending to her feathers, settled down to sleep. When the  
9 cheeping lessened, Fiona became aware of someone singing a beautiful song.  
10 There was only one bird with such a magnificent voice. Enrico. She cheeped with  
11 excitement and was amazed when he answered. She called back to let him know  
12 where she was and, seconds later, he pushed his way between her and the bird next  
13 to her then snuggled against her. They had both found their mate for life.

14           Male swallows usually arrived at their nesting area before the females but, as  
15 Enrico had never been to Scotland, he flew alongside her on the 1,200 mile journey,  
16 up the east coast of Spain, across the high Pyrenees mountain range, over western  
17 France, crossing the English Channel then heading north to Craigallian Loch, near  
18 Glasgow where they had been among the first swallows to arrive.

19           After a quick flight over the loch and around the area to show Enrico his new  
20 home, Fiona instructed him to follow in her wake to what she hoped would be their  
21 first nest together. In an arc, she descended, Enrico in her wake, toward the building  
22 where she had been born two years previously, hoping her father and mother had  
23 not already taken up residence. Seeing the gap under the door, she swept through it  
24 then fluttered up to the high ledge where their nest had been built. She chirruped  
25 her excitement to Enrico when he joined her. This time she was first to arrive but  
26 there was no time to lose in case any of her siblings, or her mother, turned up,  
27 having had the same idea. After a quick rest to preen then clear out the old nest,  
28 one of them always remaining at the nest site, between them, they began collecting  
29 mud pellets from the bank of the loch and along wet footpaths plus grasses and  
30 abandoned feathers to refurbish the nest in the old wooden boathouse, establishing  
31 it as their Scottish summer residence. By the end of March, the pair had built a  
32 snug, strong nest, lined with downy feathers, soft grass stems and heads, all woven  
33 into the now dry mud, ready for what was to come. A few days later, Fiona was  
34 incubating the first of the four eggs she would lay over the next week.

Ten days later, while she sitting on her precious clutch, pecking then disposing of insects and grubs she found in either the nest or her feathers, Enrico and the other swallows were flying high, catching insects. When he flew lower, he heard many different languages from walkers on the West Highland Way, a famous walking route from Glasgow to Fort William. Some stopped to look up and admire the little birds' acrobatics but most were too busy taking photographs of Dumgoyne Hill which the locals called 'The Camel's Hump'.

ooOoo

Fiona, released for a little while from nesting duties, flew high above the boathouse, wheeling and swooping through the early summer sky, feeding continuously to rebuild her strength. She loved it here in Scotland. The cool, damp air was full of big, juicy insects. Now, in the third week of April, she already had a chick hatched! Even with the shorter, cooler days, she felt wonderful. As the sun lowered in the western sky, with her tummy full and a bolus of assorted insects in her throat, she flew towards the boathouse, collecting any flies and insects she came across, holding them in her beak, their legs and wings sticking out the sides.

During the last few days, it had rained a lot and the loch was high. She knew this would have caused the slit between the outer doors and the water surface to be narrower than usual. Nearing the building, she flew faster, skimming the water surface for a quick drink before tweeting loudly to let Enrico know she was on her way back.

Inside the quiet interior, as soon as he heard her call, he stretched his wings then fluttered down to await her arrival. Their routine was, as soon as she was safely inside, he headed out to start feeding himself then collect the chick's next meal.

Fiona was almost at the door when Barnie the Big Pike leapt out the water, his mouth wide and menacing. She was so shocked, she dropped the insects from her beak, swerved violently then swooped skyward, screeching a warning tswit-tswit call to her mate. Inside, Enrico was confused, having no idea what had spooked Fiona. That was when he saw a huge shape emerge from under the door and silently glide alongside the jetty. While screeching a tswit-tswit message of danger back to Fiona, Enrico's instinct told him to swerve then fly upward but he was frightened and not yet



1 familiar with his surroundings. All he could do was flutter this way and that, trying to  
2 find an escape route in the half light of the old building. When he made a desperate  
3 attempt to fly over the monster and get out through the slit under the door to reach  
4 freedom, Barnie saw his opportunity, quickly turned, surged forward and upward,  
5 grabbed the little bird in his powerful jaws, submerged under water, slid under the  
6 door then headed back to deeper water. It was over in a few seconds.

7 Fiona could no longer hear Enrico's calls but her real worry was for her nest.  
8 The hatchling and her remaining eggs would suffer from excessive cooling if she did  
9 not get back to them. After flying one more quick circuit around the boathouse to  
10 catch a new batch of insects for Malcolm, compelled by her maternal instinct, all the  
11 while calling to Enrico, she swooped toward the bottom of the door, powered through  
12 the gap, swerved up, landed on the ledge then chirruped to her chick. No sooner  
13 had she popped the bolus of flies and other little insects into Malcolm's gape than he  
14 cried 'cheep-cheep-cheep' for more. She ignored his plaintive begging, climbed onto  
15 her nest, nudged Malcolm into place, spread her breast feathers apart to give him  
16 skin-to-skin contact then settled down to warm the chick and eggs, frequently calling  
17 to Enrico then listening for his reply.

18 That evening, the weather changed. A low, whining noise filled the old  
19 building and a gust of wind skittered across her back, ruffling her feathers with its  
20 breath. Turning toward the sound, she saw light shining through a small gap at the  
21 rear corner where the sidewalls met the sloping roof. She wondered if perhaps she  
22 could squeeze through such a tiny hole to avoid having to use the slit under the door.  
23 When Enrico returned, she would have a look but for now, daylight was fading and  
24 she needed to keep Malcolm and her precious eggs safe and warm. She missed  
25 Enrico's company and his gentle singing.

26 That night, the storm increased to a gale. Hailstones rattled against the roof  
27 and walls. Wind whistled through the many cracks. While Fiona checked her  
28 feathers then tidied the nest of unwanted bugs and parasites, Malcolm wriggled  
29 underneath her then was still. She was pleased he was a healthy, active chick.  
30 Time passed. The storm raged on. With no sign of Enrico, Fiona kept calling but  
31 was only met by silence.

32 When thunder crashed, it shook the boathouse, causing the boats to bang  
33 against each other. From beneath her, Fiona heard the distinct crack of an egg.  
34 She called her second chick, Moira. With no sign of Enrico, if he did not return, she

1 knew she would have to work very hard to bring up her brood, especially if all four  
2 eggs hatched. When the new chick had settled, Fiona called to Enrico once more  
3 then tucked her head under her wing and slept, all the while keeping one ear  
4 listening for his return.

## Discovery

The storm blew itself out overnight. When the dawn light seeped in, Fiona peeked over the edge of the nest to make sure all was safe. Her tummy ached for food. Malcolm was squirming and squawking and Moira was giving pleading little cheeps for her first mouthful. If she no longer had Enrico to bring food, Fiona knew she had no choice but to find it herself. Using her beak, she dug around the nest, found a few bugs and grubs which she ate then pushed Malcolm, who had now grown a few downy feathers, on top of Moira and the two unhatched eggs to keep them insulated.

She stretched her body and wings then launched herself off the nest, swooped downward, flew under the narrow slit between door and water, emerging into a miserable early morning. At first, she flew in tight circles just above the boathouse, calling repeatedly for Enrico. After feeding herself, she began calling again but, when he did not respond, she began to let her memory of him go.

Back on the nest, after several hunting expeditions, she stuffed boluses of insects into both chicks' gapes, picked out parasites crawling over them then some from the interior of the nest, dropping them all over the side before settling to brood her precious hatchlings and keep her two unhatched eggs warm.

Against the brood patch under her warm breast, she felt another movement then heard a new and faint cheep-cheeping. Kenneth had arrived meaning she now had three chicks to feed. She would now have to begin almost never-ending flights to provide for them all but, before heading headed out, she needed to take a short rest.

The dull, wet and windy weather continued off and on for the next three days by which time, Fiona had settled into her new routine as a lone parent, never leaving the nest unattended for more than a few minutes at a time. It was taking its toll on her energy, made worse by the lack of insects to be found in the bad weather. She was exhausted, losing condition but flying as often as she could while resting less and less. Her brood were her sole motivation to keep going.

1

2 A group of men, talking and laughing, approached the old boathouse, threw  
3 the doors open, filling the interior with light, revealing a bright, sunny day, with high,  
4 fluffy clouds scudding by on a warm breeze.

5 One stood on the jetty, looking up, saw a bird sitting on the old nest on the  
6 ledge and called to his companions, 'A-ha, our swallows are nesting with us again!'

7 Another voice said, jokingly, 'Well done, Inspector Clouseau. They've only  
8 been here since the 25<sup>th</sup> of March. Did you not see John Bee's email asking if his  
9 was the first sighting of a swallow this year?'

10 'Is that not too early for Scotland?'

11 'No. His email said the earliest record the Scottish Wildlife Trust has was for  
12 the 7<sup>th</sup> of March but that was some years ago.'

13 A gruff voice said, 'Right lads, let's get on with all our Work Sunday tasks.'

14 The boats were rowed out and the building became quiet again.

15 Fiona took advantage of the safe route, flying out the open door leading to the  
16 loch then arced up into the morning sky and started feeding. Minutes later, she  
17 returned with a bolus of insects which she stuffed into Malcolm's gape while ignoring  
18 Moira's open mouth. On her next return, she quickly pushed food into Moira's beak  
19 before heading back out for a third hunt, this time finding food for young Kenneth.  
20 After pushing the bolus into his beak, ignoring the hunger cheeps from the other two,  
21 Fiona brooded them all for a few minutes to keep them warm. Over the next few  
22 hours, she did this time after time until all three chicks were satisfied and had  
23 dropped off to sleep. After cleaning the interior of the nest and removing grubs,  
24 some of which, in her desperation for more food, she ate, she settled on top of her  
25 hatchlings and the single egg, had a quick preen then closed her eyes briefly. She  
26 no longer had any memory of Enrico, only of how tired she felt all the time.

27 Moira, and now Kenneth's, constant chirrups for food then Malcolm's more  
28 aggressive ploy of pecking her leg, forced Fiona to stretch her body and wings,  
29 ready for the next hunt. Checking her chicks were safe, she watched as Malcolm  
30 turned around and pointed his pink-skinned rear end over the edge of the nest.  
31 Again, instinct told Fiona what to do. She flew over to flutter, chirruped and, when he  
32 expelled a tiny, white faecal sac, took it in her beak, flew out the door and dropped it  
33 into the loch. Another chore to be done for all three but, for now, gathering food was  
34 more important.

ooOoo

While the men packed up for the day, closed then locked the big doors, Fiona was flying high above the far end of the loch, unaware she would no longer be able to enter or leave by the safe route. It was not until she was heading back, she saw the cars trundle along the path and realised flying through the open door was no longer an option. Again, she would have to use the more dangerous route and adjusted her flight path but, on approach, noticed a movement in the dark water which could only mean one thing; Barnie the Big Pike. Instead of taking a chance of flying under the door, she rapidly changed direction, swept up in a curve and perched on the top of the old building. Fluttering along to the edge, she peered down but saw no sign of her enemy, not even a ripple on the surface of the water and decided he must have given up. She was about to take off and head back to the door when an inner feeling warned her he might be lurking inside, knowing she must appear soon. It was then she remembered the chink of light shining in the corner where the side wall met the sloping roof and decided now was the ideal time to check it from outside.

Taking off, she flew around the building, trying to work out which corner had the gap. On her third circuit, she spotted it. On closer inspection, it looked narrower than it had from the inside. Clinging to the soft wood with her claws, by using her beak, she managed to loosen a few slivers. She moved position and loosened a few more from the other side, letting each tiny piece fall to the ground. When the crack was a little wider and longer, she tentatively poked her beak then her head in and her bird brain told her, if they went in easily, her streamlined body would follow. However, she had forgotten she had eaten a large number of insects while hunting, making her a little plumper than usual. She pulled and strained but her body and legs remained on the other side of the wall. Fiona was stuck and gave a loud squawk of frustration. When the chicks heard their mother's voice, they called to her and it was their hunger tweets which gave her the impetus to use all her strength to shimmy her entire body through. Once in, she flew down to the nest where she was greeted by Malcolm's wide open yellow and orange gape and, beside him, two smaller ones, each pushing and begging for her catch. Malcolm, being the fittest and now almost able to see, was first to be fed but the other two continued to beg. She had found a

1 much safer way to get in and out when the doors were closed although, for easier  
2 comings and goings, she would have to widen the hole a little more. Before heading  
3 into the sky to collect food for the two younger chicks, she pulled off slivers from both  
4 sides until she was satisfied she could get in and out easily and, more importantly,  
5 safely.

6 From that day on, Malcolm now looked to this chink of light when waiting for  
7 his mother to return with more food. His siblings' eyes would not fully open for  
8 another few days.

## Survivors

A week or so later, Malcolm and Moira, both now with full sight and Kenneth, whose eyes were almost open, were growing rapidly, although Kenneth was not as lively as he should have been. The fourth egg had not hatched and, a few days earlier, Fiona had tipped it out from the nest where it dropped to float on the surface of the inky water before vanishing later that day. Three chicks were enough of a challenge for her to rear on her own.

The little mother was only just coping, flying off as soon as she sensed a glimmer of light. She loved the cool dampness of these early mornings. Especially, she loved the misty rain which brought out thousands of midges and, on dry days, beetles, flies, bluebottles in abundance and, on warmer days, a few tasty butterflies. When she was sure her chicks' tummies were full and, if it was warm enough for them to be left for longer, she would perch on the roof outside and sing to them before heading skyward to hunt. Her songs were quiet and beautiful; some happy and quick, others slow and sad. Despite its dangers in air and water, she loved Craigallian Loch, with its companionship from fellow swallows, an abundance of food and the plops and splashes of trout as they emerged to snatch flies, gnats and midges from on or just above the surface.

Occasionally, when dipping to sip water or bathe her breast feathers, Fiona would see a trout gliding slowly and elegantly, just beneath the surface. One day, a huge bird she had heard one of the fishermen call an osprey, plummeted from a great height to snatch a trout so big, it took three attempts, with the still-jerking trout in its talons, to become airborne before flapping powerfully to the top of a tall tree where it, still holding the squirming body down with its powerful talons, used its strong beak to rip the flesh from the fish. After his meal, the osprey had then sat for hours, resting and digesting. Fiona worried about such large birds, especially the ones the men had called buzzards and black crows, although she thought her small size, agility and speed would make her difficult to catch. Nevertheless, she was always wary of other birds while hunting.

At other times, sitting on the boathouse roof, especially at dusk and dawn, she would watch a most odd looking bird which she had been told was a grey heron. It

1 was very tall, grey and white in colour and could stand still on its very long legs for  
 2 up to an hour without the slightest movement. It could even stand on just one leg  
 3 while resting the other! Often, just when Fiona thought the bird must have fallen  
 4 asleep, it would lunge forwards and spear a frog or small fish from the water's edge.  
 5 Its hunting method seemed almost effortless and so unlike her way which required  
 6 continuous movement and aerial agility. Had Fiona not been a swallow, she would  
 7 love to have been a heron.

8  
 9 ooOoo

10  
 11 At the end of the first week of May, Malcolm and Moira were now well fed,  
 12 active and inquisitive and little Kenneth was looking stronger. Her instinct told her it  
 13 was essential her fledglings leave the nest as soon as possible to learn both how to  
 14 fly and to catch their own food. She knew she did not have the strength to keep up  
 15 her daily routine for much longer. Already, Malcolm was balancing on the edge of  
 16 the nest, trying out his little wings but had yet to grow flight feathers so was, as yet,  
 17 unable to take to the air. Moira had begun stretching hers but within the confines of  
 18 the nest, only having delicate baby feathers. Kenneth still had more down than  
 19 feathers and spent most of his day asleep. Because the two younger ones were  
 20 slightly smaller than they should have been, Fiona knew, over the next few days,  
 21 they needed to build their strength. Once fledged, they would all have plenty time to  
 22 become robust enough for the long, long trip to South Africa before the cold weather  
 23 arrived at Craigallian Loch but she too, needed time to regain her strength. It was  
 24 imperative to be at the peak of fitness for the Great Migration south. She was proud  
 25 of raising three chicks on her own and would begin training Malcolm to catch his own  
 26 food once he chose to leave the nest for his first flight but for now, she needed to  
 27 sleep. Snuggled above her precious babies, they all settled for the night.

28 When the dawn light glimmered the following morning, Fiona sensed a good  
 29 day ahead, with light winds and an abundance of food for her chicks. Leaving them  
 30 curled in feathery balls, she made her way out for her first hunting flight of the day.

31 Malcolm looked forward to early mornings because, although his tummy often  
 32 ached from hunger, he knew his mother would soon return with a beak full of insects.  
 33 Bullying his siblings, pushing his big, yellow gape towards his mother whenever she  
 34 returned with food, ensured he was always first to be fed. As a result, he was now



1 strong enough to test his wings properly several times a day while clawing the side  
2 of the nest, almost over-balancing at times. He only cared about himself. Moira and  
3 Kenneth would have to take their chances.

4 As a lone parent, Fiona knew she had done her best for her little family but  
5 her instinct told her the time had come for Malcolm to leave. He was ready to fly,  
6 had learned to preen his feathers properly and had grown so much, there was little  
7 room for movement when all four of them were in the nest. After feeding all three  
8 chicks, she brooded them while singing softly then left to continue hunting. On her  
9 return from subsequent hunts, she ignored her firstborn's demands to be fed. On  
10 her next arrival, Malcolm climbed on top of little Kenneth, squashing him into the  
11 base of the nest, while pecking his mother to gain her attention but she refused to  
12 give in. After feeding Moira then Kenneth, she again disappeared through the hole  
13 in the roof. Next time she arrived with food, the calm was disturbed by Malcolm who  
14 squirmed vigorously to push his gape as close to her beak as possible, not  
15 understanding why she would not put food in it. Each time he attempted to steal  
16 from his mother's beak, she turned from him, pushing her beak into that of one of the  
17 smaller birds then stretched her wings, collected yet another faecal sac, flew toward  
18 the chink of light, squeezed out and was gone.

19 The next time Fiona arrived, Malcolm could see her head, poking through the  
20 hole in the corner but she did not come inside. Instead, she remained where she  
21 was, twittering gently then vanishing before immediately appearing again. Malcolm  
22 began loud, plaintive, begging, cheep-cheep-cheep calls for food while watching as  
23 the beam of light coming through the corner of the roof grew brighter and the shed  
24 grew warmer from the sun's heat. When his mother poked her head through the  
25 hole in the roof space for a third time, he was baffled when she did not come in to  
26 feed him or the others but wagged her head at him, encouraging him to come and  
27 collect his breakfast from her.

28 Now desperate for a meal, he knew what he had to do. Clinging to the rim of  
29 the nest, he had an experimental flap or two then clambered awkwardly down to the  
30 ledge where he shuffled away from the nest. Teetering on the edge, he almost over-  
31 balanced but one glimpse of the rocking boats made him grip deeper into the soft  
32 wood while flapping his wings as hard as he could until he regained his balance. Still  
33 gripping the wood, he flapped again which felt wonderful. Hearing Fiona's  
34 encouraging tweets spurred him on. After a little rest, he flapped more vigorously,

1 aware of a power surge throughout his body. Malcolm now realised, the harder he  
2 moved his wings up and down, the more his body wanted to rise above the ledge  
3 and, if he wanted to reach the hole in the corner of the roof, where his mother held  
4 his breakfast, he would need to be able to fly there. Again, deep instinct kicked in.  
5 After a quick preen around his feathers to ensure each was in the correct position,  
6 he stretched both wings, pushed his body down toward the ledge, released his claws  
7 and, to his amazement, found himself heading up and toward the exit hole.  
8 Managing to stop just before hitting the wall, he clung to the edge and, after poking  
9 his head through the gap his mother used, was amazed at what he saw. So much  
10 space, so much light, so many insects. He saw his mother, flying just out of reach  
11 across and back, encouraging him to join her. With food his priority, he slid his way  
12 out into the bright sunshine but, forgetting to open his wings fully, almost fell.  
13 Clinging precariously by one foot, he swung sideways from the edge of the hole,  
14 fluttering out of control, desperately trying to regain his balance, to grip something,  
15 anything solid with his other foot. In his panic, he was calling tswit-tswit loudly,  
16 broadcasting his fear. Now completely out of control, the strain was becoming too  
17 great. The little fledgling lost his grip and plunged earthward.

## Ordeal

Malcolm's life, as he had known it, was over. He was outside for the first time but fluttering towards the water. Black Eric the Mink had heard the bird's panic cries and was racing toward the sound, half running across the matted reeds, half swimming, moving a rocket speed.

The mink scrabbled up the side the boathouse and launched himself at the swallow with an angry hiss. The little bird, flapping frantically, glimpsed a dark shape, with a huge mouth of snarling, yellow teeth which he instinctively knew meant danger. Forcing his wings to spread as wide as possible, he flapped more and more vigorously, managing, not a moment too soon, to swerve to one side then gain height. Black Eric only just missed his morning snack, his sharp teeth snapping shut on fresh air as he landed with a splash, his momentum taking him well below the surface.

Barnie the Big Pike, wanting to see if what had fallen in the water was a tasty morsel he could eat, swirled toward it but Black Eric had already spotted him and, as mink are excellent swimmers and unafraid of any pike, however big, took no notice. In fact, mink loved to eat pike and lunch looked as if it was on the way. As soon as Barnie saw it was Black Eric coming towards him, he twisted away, flashed his large tail then took refuge in deeper water.

Black Eric the Mink was more than angry. In less than two minutes, two meals had escaped. Raising his head above the surface to look around he heard a faint 'cheerup-cheerup' from the reeds beyond the boathouse then swam off to investigate. Perhaps he might catch a baby duckling for lunch.

ooOoo

By instinctively swerving away from the attack, Malcolm had survived. Now, through information embedded in the genes, he flew upward, calling for his mother who swooped down to his level, rewarding him with the food she had caught. He followed her, learning to take food from her while in flight and, when he felt the moment was right, soared upward in pure ecstasy with the joy of flying. The rest of

1 the day was spent flying, his mother feeding him between her hunts to feed his  
2 siblings. It felt wonderful to fly high and free. His sharp eyes saw a tiny fly ahead.  
3 He grabbed at it but missed, wheeled around to chase it but it was gone. The next  
4 insect was larger, slower. On approach, he rocked his wings then grabbed it in his  
5 beak. Down it went, plump and juicy. Within an hour, he was almost adept at  
6 feeding on the wing, his hunger and natural instincts honing his skills. When he  
7 looked around his wonderful, new environment, he saw the air was filled with birds.  
8 Many looked like him but others he did not recognise. Over time, he learned the  
9 house martins flew with the swallows and those flying much higher were swifts.

10 In the gloaming, Malcolm joined Fiona on her final hunting flight of the day.  
11 After feeding herself then her son, she filled her throat and beak with enough food for  
12 Moira and Kenneth. Malcolm followed her back to the safety of the nest, something  
13 he would continue to do for the next week or two until he was able to be completely  
14 independent. On his approach to the building, he thought getting through the hole in  
15 the wall would be easy but he had not yet learned how to slow down at the right  
16 moment. Not only slowing down; he also had to learn to flutter, grab hold of the  
17 wood with his claws then push his head into the gap, almost all at the same time.  
18 On his first run, he approached but overshot the corner then had to flap frantically to  
19 regain control. On his second, although he slowed, his claws did not dig deep  
20 enough into the wood and he felt himself falling. He panicked, remembering his  
21 narrow escape from the big, yellow teeth and the sound of the horrible snarling hiss  
22 when the black shape lunged toward him but this time, managed to immediately  
23 angle his wings and gain height. At his third attempt, he landed safely, pulled  
24 himself through the gap in the wood and, once inside, chirruped a happy little song;  
25 the same song his father, Enrico, used to sing. Malcolm could fly, catch food, feed  
26 himself and now, he had also found his singing voice.

27 Each day, the higher Malcolm flew, when he looked down at the landscape,  
28 everything seemed even smaller. He saw Craigallian House, high on a hill, beyond  
29 the end of the loch. Wheeling around for another circuit, he saw the knobbly shape  
30 of Dumgoyne Hill. Although he did not know it, these were the same landmarks  
31 which Fiona had used to find the loch on both her returns from South Africa and  
32 were now being imprinted in Malcolm's brain. During his first flights, he had no idea  
33 of the long journeys he would undertake but perhaps the lines of the Earth's

1 magnetic force for Craigallian were also becoming embedded in his brain to help him  
2 return to the place of his birth.

3 By early evening, after his first days of flying and feeding lessons, Malcolm  
4 was always in need of a rest by late evening and looked forward to a good night's  
5 sleep, snuggled in the nest. As days turned to a week then almost two, his need to  
6 return to the warmth and safety of the nest lessened. On the day he joined company  
7 with other swallow fledglings, he completely cut ties with his family.

## Too Late

After Malcolm had left the nest, Fiona continued to bring food for Moira and Kenneth, brooding them for a few minutes before setting off again. With her daughter's feathers appearing, there was no need to sit for long because while her daughter slept, she was keeping Kenneth warm. With more space in the nest, Moira had the courage to cling to the edge to preen and exercise her wings but was aware she was not yet ready to leave.

After a few days of feeding both her chicks, Fiona decided the time had come for Moira to join her outside. The weather was perfect. There were insects everywhere and really, there no reason for Moira to be fed in the nest. On her next arrival, ignoring Moira's tweets of hunger, she fed only Kenneth before disappearing through the hole in the roof.

Moira had no idea why her mother had refused her food and her hunger drove her to squawk her annoyance, while gripping the side of the nest. Again, her mother arrived with food and, for a second time, fed only Kenneth, although he did not seem much interested. After she left, Moira heard singing but not her mother's. Her first thought was, it could be Malcolm but she did not think she had ever heard him sing that song. Perhaps it was a visiting swallow. Whoever it was, their happy song gave her the incentive she needed to leave the nest. She began to preen her feathers then stretch her wings for what she knew was the start of the next part of her life.

Like Malcolm a few days earlier, Moira's instincts kicked in. She wove her way across the rim of the nest, flapping her wings then scrambled down to the ledge, clung on and began flapping and flapping until she felt the blood-surge bring strength. She could hear her mother's encouraging calls from the hole in the roof but did not feel ready to head into the unknown just yet. After a short rest, she exercised her wings again and this time, felt her body lighten. She now knew, after another couple of practises, she would be able to fly.

In the nest, Kenneth woke, alone and hungry. He fluffed his growing feathers to trap and warm the air, occasionally cheeping for food but his calls remained unanswered. His mother did not appear although he could hear her cheeps coming from the gap in the wall. His little brain told him, if he wanted feeding, he would have

1 to go to her. He pushed his little wings out then stood up. On wobbly legs, he stood  
 2 and stretched his only partially feathered wings but they caught on the sides of the  
 3 nest. To extend them further would involve standing near the edge and, if he could  
 4 do that, he might be able to open them enough to fly to his mother and be rewarded  
 5 with a snack of luscious insects. Using his feet, beak and half-folded wings, he  
 6 struggled but managed to claw his way from the feather-lined nest, up the hard,  
 7 rough wall to the rim where he tentatively spread his wings then flapped weakly. It  
 8 was not easy to grip with little claws, balance and attempt to flap, all at the same  
 9 time.

10 On the ledge, Moira was again trying out her wings when she heard a noise.  
 11 She froze and listened. The sound of car tyres crunching on gravel told her  
 12 someone would be coming soon to open the doors and she thought it would be  
 13 easier to swoop out that way instead of using what little strength she had left to fly up  
 14 to the hole in the roof. She looked over at the nest where Kenneth was now  
 15 wobbling on the edge, his immature wings pointing up from either side of his little  
 16 body. Moira called to her mother but this time, she did not answer. Unable to help  
 17 Kenneth, she shuffled along to the far end of the ledge, tucked herself into the  
 18 corner, a lonely, frightened little bird, desperate for a meal. From here, she watched  
 19 Kenneth flit and flutter while clawing at the side of the nest, trying his hardest to  
 20 regain its safety but, when he tried to fly, he lost his balance and she heard his  
 21 screeches of confusion and panic. He disappeared. His next squawks were tswit-  
 22 tswit distress signals, intermingled with the splashing of water. She looked down  
 23 and cheeped to let him know she was nearby. There was no sign of him but he  
 24 replied with a tiny chirrup then was silent. His silence brought stillness to the interior  
 25 which made Moira tuck herself further into the corner. It was the first time she had  
 26 ever been alone and she had no idea what to do about it. All she could hope for was  
 27 her mother's return but something inside her told her this would not happen.

28  
 29 ooOoo  
 30

31 The man pushed the doors wide, walked in, had a look around then opened  
 32 the book on the shelf, wrote his name on the next blank line, noting the time as 4.15  
 33 pm. On checking previous entries, he was surprised to note the loch has not been

1 fished for nearly a week. While loading his gear into a boat, something caught his  
2 eye. Looking down, he saw a dead swallow lying in the water.

3 'Drat!' he said. 'If only someone had been here to fish, the door would have  
4 been open and it might have been easier for the wee thing to get out.'

5 In all his years of fishing at the loch, this was the first time he had seen a dead  
6 swallow, although he realised it would always be a risk for any bird to get in or out  
7 under the closed door leading to the loch but the one now floating just out of his  
8 reach looked immature, as if it had either fallen from the nest or was on its maiden  
9 flight.

10 Leaving the doors open, the man rowed off to fish. With the sun shining  
11 directly into the boathouse, it now looked bright and airy.

12 With no sign of her mother and the man and boat now out on the loch, a more  
13 confident but very hungry, Moira shuffled over to the middle of the ledge. Keeping a  
14 good grip on the wood, she tried out her wings, opening and closing them several  
15 times but was still reluctant to let go and fly for the first time. She gave herself a  
16 good preen, flapped as hard as she could but nothing happened. Learning to fly was  
17 more difficult than she had anticipated. After fluffing her feathers, she decided a little  
18 rest was called for before beginning her adventure into the great outdoors and  
19 returned to the safety of the corner.

20 On hearing the gentle plop-swish, plop-swish of the oars pushing the boat  
21 toward the boathouse, Moira opened her eyes and realised she had slept longer  
22 than she should have. Dusk was falling and soon the light would have gone. She  
23 had to find food before night fall or she would never survive. Soon the door would  
24 close and she would be trapped. Now determined to escape without further delay,  
25 she shuffled back to the middle of the ledge, stretched to her full height, flapped far  
26 harder than she had before and felt her body lighten. With fully extended wings, she  
27 was amazed when she felt them surge with life and begin to lift her entire body with  
28 ease. That was when she knew she was really ready for her first flight. Releasing  
29 her claws from the ledge, instead of soaring to the heavens, she found herself  
30 fluttering, almost out of control, toward the black water. Just in time, she managed to  
31 turn towards the opening but, at the same moment, the bow of the boat appeared,  
32 preventing her exit. Now in a panic, she tried to gain height but instead, landed with  
33 a thump on the jetty.



1           She lay still but unhurt, knowing she was in danger if she did not through the  
2 door as quickly as she could. She pushed down then launched herself but, in her  
3 weakened state, could not summon enough strength to get airborne and again fell  
4 but this time, into the water. Screeching in fear, she skittered across the surface,  
5 past the length of the boat, out the door and headed toward the first thing she saw  
6 which might offer shelter. The man in the boat watched as she reached the safety of  
7 the reeds where she tried to climb the nearest reed stalk.

8           ‘Well done, wee one. You’ve made it! Now climb right up. Go on! You  
9 can.....’

10           An enormous splash stopped the man in mid sentence as he watched in  
11 horror when Barnie the Big Pike leapt from the water, snatched the little bird whole  
12 then slid back into the inky depths of the loch, leaving only a swirl, two feathers and  
13 some bubbles on the surface.

14           ‘Bugger it! You bloody pike are merciless,’ he shouted at the now calming,  
15 water. ‘You steal our trout and now you’ve killed a defenceless little bird too. One  
16 day you’ll be caught then you’ll know what it feels like, blast you.’

17           Manoeuvring the boat back to its place then tying it up, he thought, if only he  
18 had arrived back a few minutes earlier, perhaps the poor thing would have been able  
19 to fly out safely.

20           After signing himself out in the book, he checked the water’s surface inside  
21 and outside the boathouse. There was no sign of the other fledgling.

## Twin Migrations

Above Craigallian Loch, in the gloom of the darkening sky, Malcolm knew nothing of what had happened to Kenneth and Moira. Below him, in the Big Tree, he could hear lots of swallows and other birds. He flew down, planning to join the flock but, by mistake, landed beside a group of house martins, with their distinctive white rumps, who attacked him, bullying him off his perch. He soared and swirled round then settled on a higher branch, this time among other swallows. Next to him was a mature male, called Norman and soon there were many others bunching in. Malcolm, like the other birds, was shouting loudly and the air was filled with their chatter. Then the chirruping began and the swallows sang against the house martins. He was having great fun. It was after midnight before the choirs fell silent. Malcolm then slept soundly, surrounded by his new friends and began to dream.

ooOoo

In his dream, he remembered all that had happened, starting with the first beak of flies delivered by Enrico all those weeks earlier. Memories of his parents, pushing food into his mouth before whirling away then arriving back with more, flashed again and again. Next came the longer, early summer days with their rattles of woodpeckers, caws of crows, shrieking of jays, mewing of buzzards, haunting, booming songs of cuckoos, soft cooing of wood pigeons and the gentle songs his mother sang. He lived through the terrifying attack from Black Eric the mink, mouth wide, showing his big, yellow teeth and, just as he was about to be eaten, Malcolm woke when he cheeped sharply in panic. When he tried to go back to sleep, he remembered the warm, safe, feeling of snuggling under his mother's brood patch, next to Moira and Kenneth in their tiny nest and he leaned against Norman for comfort.

When the first lights of dawn glimmered on the loch, Malcolm let his dreams go. There was no need to recall the past. He had the future to look forward to. From that day on, he thought only of himself.

1           From the middle of July, an urge began making itself felt in Malcolm and all  
2 those around him. Norman told him to concentrate on flying techniques, learning to  
3 avoid obstacles with ease, swooping from side to side, avoiding mid air collisions  
4 and all the while, remembering to catch his food while in flight to ensure he kept in tip  
5 top condition. He also heard from the older birds, when the season changed and the  
6 days became shorter, they would all migrate on a long and difficult expedition to a  
7 place called South Africa where it would be warm, with plenty food for everyone and  
8 the company of many, many thousands of birds just like him. If he wanted to survive  
9 the journey, now was the time to practise flying from dawn to dusk without landing  
10 and repeat his flying manoeuvres until he no longer had to think what to do, should  
11 danger arise. Listening to the older birds discussing the forthcoming Great  
12 Migration, he realised he had no idea where South Africa was. It was a relief when  
13 Norman told him all he had to do was fly alongside those who had been before.

14           When August arrived, the high-flying swifts began leaving in small groups.  
15 Malcolm had been told most were heading for the west coast of Africa, flying non-  
16 stop, at 25 mph, arriving there in five to seven days' time, if all went well. After  
17 resting and feeding, their next stage was non-stop east to central Africa where they  
18 would over-winter. Every day, Malcolm saw small flocks leave and knew he would  
19 not see them again until the following spring.

20           As the days became shorter so the nights became darker, cooler and longer.  
21 Cold winds occasionally whistled through the branches of the Big Tree, snatching  
22 leaves and hurling them into the night. One morning, the swallows woke to better  
23 weather, with little breeze and the collective decision was made. The entire flock  
24 soared high and, with the morning sun rising to their left, set off, heading south  
25 toward the far tip of the continent of South Africa, 7,000 miles away. The birds had  
26 no concept of time or mileage, only of the need to migrate so had no idea their  
27 journey would take up to four leisurely months before they reached their destination  
28 in December.

29           Malcolm noticed the house martins had not joined them and asked Norman if  
30 he knew why but he did not have a real answer. His parents and some of the older  
31 birds had told him the martins, with their white rumps and forked tails, were  
32 rumoured to leave later to keep their destination a secret but he had also heard, they  
33 flew very high indeed, so high, they were safe from predators and, when they arrived

1 in the damp atmosphere in somewhere called the rainforests which were in the  
2 middle of Africa, they flew so high in the sky, they became invisible.

3  
4 ooOoo

5  
6 Malcolm enjoyed his first migration. With no urgency to arrive at their  
7 destination, there was time to stop off at various places to rest, eat and socialise with  
8 swallows from other countries, flying south, using the same routes through France,  
9 Spain then across the Mediterranean Sea to North Africa. On their overnight stop  
10 between Morocco and Algeria, Malcolm and the other first-timers, were instructed by  
11 the older birds to ensure their feathers were in tip-top order, their tummies as full as  
12 possible and, most importantly, they keep together for safety. The following  
13 morning, while the air was still cool, after bathing, sipping water, preening then  
14 having a quick aerial feed, the massive flock took to the sky en masse to head south,  
15 over Algeria then the expanse of the Sahara Desert. Here, many birds, mainly older  
16 or weaker, fell to the ground, exhausted by its dry heat and lack of water but Malcolm  
17 was in peak condition and, although it was challenging in the extreme, he and most  
18 of the Craigallian swallows survived the scorching heat, arid conditions and attacks  
19 by predator birds. On the far side of the desert, after time for water, preening and  
20 sleep, the flocks took to the sky to continue their flight south, with overnight stops in  
21 traditional sites which had been used for hundreds, if not thousands, of years by  
22 migrating swallows.

23 At Ebok Boje, in Nigeria, another traditional stopping point, the local people  
24 had been on the lookout for the swallow migration knowing, when they landed for the  
25 night, a great feast and party would take place. They already had nets set up to  
26 capture as many birds as possible while they roosted in the tall elephant grasses. It  
27 was more by luck than anything else, both Norman and Malcolm avoided capture,  
28 having arrived toward the end of the landing, thus avoiding the grasses nearest the  
29 humans where most of the birds would be trapped in the pre-laid nets. There was no  
30 singing that night and, the following morning, the flock which flew south was smaller  
31 by several thousand.

32 In mid December, Malcolm touched down in his new home for the next two  
33 months. His time in the African summer passed all too quickly. Almost every day  
34 was warm and sunny, with plenty of nourishing food for everyone. The Craigallian

1 swallows met lots of other birds at the roosting trees and Malcolm heard lots of  
 2 strange voices singing different songs which he found very exciting. Several of his  
 3 companions paired up with a female but Malcolm was having too much fun to think  
 4 of such things.

5  
 6 ooOoo  
 7

8 By mid–February, Malcolm was a mature bird with dark red breast and belly  
 9 feathers plus straight tail feathers. To a female swallow, all these indicated he was  
 10 of good status, healthy and had the ability to help raise his chicks. He now felt the  
 11 tug, the urge to head north, back to Craigallian. In the swirl of swallows above his  
 12 branch in the roosting tree, he heard a voice he knew; Norman. Next day, side by  
 13 side, the pair started what would be a fast five-week flight north, alongside many  
 14 thousands of other swallows, heading in the same direction. Malcolm took the same  
 15 route both his mother and many generations of their ancestors had used, flying over  
 16 land and water, catching insects on the wing to keep his strength up, only landing at  
 17 dusk to chatter, preen, clean then sleep.

18 The Sahara Desert again took its toll of older and weaker birds and, although  
 19 almost every bird to arrive in Morocco was exhausted, their instincts forced them,  
 20 after a short break for recuperation and feather preening, to continue their flight  
 21 north.

22 From Morocco, they crossed the Mediterranean Sea into Spain where they  
 23 parted company with those whose home was to the west. Malcolm had become  
 24 friendly with some birds who told him they were going to their seaside town in A  
 25 Guarda where they were looking forward to feasting on the thousands of flies,  
 26 billowing up from the seaweed which lay along some of the beaches.

27 Malcolm and Norman, in the centre of their large flock, broke away to head  
 28 east, following the coast north and, like their ancestors, approached Barcelona.  
 29 Here they flew over its beaches, before heading inland to roost in buildings, roof tops  
 30 and other suitable places. Although Malcolm was unaware of it, his mother had  
 31 flown the exact same route on her migration north and landed in almost the same  
 32 place.

33 While eating their fill in and around Barcelona, the flock became aware of bad  
 34 weather approaching from the north which would affect their migration. A massive

1 depression had brought a spring storm from the north west which lashed the area for  
2 three days without respite, preventing the French, Scandinavian, Belgian and British  
3 contingencies from continuing northward. The migrating swallows now mingled with  
4 those who would remain in Barcelona to nest, many roosting with them in the eaves  
5 of old buildings but their choice was dangerous. Local feral cats ate many of the little  
6 birds, silently creeping along the roof beams to snatch them as they slept.

7         During the storm, Malcolm and Norman had lost contact while hunting for food  
8 which was becoming scarce because of the heavy rain. After two unsuccessful  
9 sorties, eating when something came along, while continually calling his friend's  
10 name but never getting a reply, now cold and wet, Malcolm gave up and made his  
11 way, in the never-ending rain, to the nearest shelter he could find. Perched in the  
12 eaves of an old barn, he shook water droplets from his wet feathers, ruffled them to  
13 create some warmth, preened then settled to take stock of his surroundings. He  
14 appeared to be the only bird there but soon had company when he was joined by a  
15 pretty little swallow who introduced herself as Juanita. Born locally, she had just  
16 arrived home, after her first migration and informed him he was in her family home.  
17 Both happy to have company, they chirruped, tweeted and chattered to each other,  
18 became friends and quickly knew they had found their mate for life. Malcolm was  
19 unaware, apart from admiring his deep red chest feathers which told her he would be  
20 an excellent father for their future family, his tail, much longer than that of any  
21 Spanish swallow, had been the main attraction.

22         As soon as the bad weather headed south, the Craigallian contingency feeling  
23 the urge to head north, took off en masse. This time, Malcolm was accompanied by  
24 Juanita who was more than happy to follow her handsome, fit, Scottish swallow.

## Homecoming

The flock arrived over Craigallian Loch on the 15<sup>th</sup> March, the first day of the Brown Trout season. All four boats were out on the water and both doors of the old boathouse had been left open. Malcolm flew straight in, swooped up to find the nest site and landed on the high ledge where Juanita joined him, tweeting her happiness. The nest in which Malcolm had been born was still there and, more importantly, was available.

Together, they inspected the nest remains. Desperate to claim ownership, they busied themselves, pecking at the dried mud walls to pull out dead grasses, rubbish and lumps of cracked mud from the previous years, all of which they dropped over the edge where the debris splashed into the water or landed either on the jetty or in a boat. Now, with the shell ready for renovation, leaving Juanita to explore and protect their new home, Malcolm flew off, returning again and again with little dollops of fresh mud and tiny stones from nearby paths and the loch side to strengthen the old nest.

Once they were both satisfied they then took it in turn to fly in and out, always ensuring one remained at the nest site to chase off any nest-hunting swallows. While Malcolm kept watch, Juanita swooped over the land, searching for soft grass heads, algae and downy feathers to soften the cup her eggs would lie in. Malcolm swooped out as soon as he heard her approach and soon they were both darting in and out until they were satisfied they had the perfect home in which to start a family. Leaving her to settle in, he flew out for the sheer joy of being home, having the most attractive partner and having helped build their first nest.

The day on which Malcolm and Juanita's life together on Craigallian Loch began had been bright and calm but, being early spring, the daylight did not last long. When he approached the boathouse after his final flight of the day, both doors had been closed and he was uncertain how to get back to Juanita. Something in his psyche warned him not to fly under the door. Adjusting his flight path, he swooped to one side then up to the roof where he tweeted to Juanita, telling her he had returned and not to worry. There was something familiar about the roof but he could not think what. After shuffling back and forth, he took to the wing and flew around all

1 four sides. When he passed one corner in particular, his memory told him this had  
2 been his escape route. Sure enough, when he managed to dig his little claws into  
3 the soft wood, through the gap, he could hear Juanita's chirrups. He pecked a few  
4 slivers of wood from either side, pushed his head into the hole and found his body  
5 slithering through behind him. He was home and had rediscovered the safe way in  
6 and out.

7 When the sun set and daylight faded to darkness, in the safety of their chosen  
8 and beautifully restored home, Malcolm and Juanita knew they had found the perfect  
9 place to bring up a family. Tired after such a long, busy and exciting day, they  
10 snuggled into each other in the nest they had built together.

11  
12 ooOoo  
13

14 Unknown to Malcolm and Juanita, from their spot in the loch, the fishermen  
15 had seen the two little swallows flying in and out of the old boathouse. After  
16 returning, having caught three good-sized trout, they moored the boat and repacked  
17 all their fishing equipment ready to put in their cars. Before leaving, one of them  
18 noted the birds' arrival in the book on the shelf. The men were all pleased to know  
19 their swallows had returned to Craigallian Loch, with its cool damp summer air which  
20 would soon become filled with insects to feed a new generation of swallows, thus  
21 keeping the local flock viable. This summers' fledglings would be in swallow  
22 paradise.

23 By late April, Malcolm and Juanita had four healthy, energetic chicks,  
24 cheeping in the nest, watched over by their proud parents.