

Making Ripples

by Amanda Bancroft

What if we could fly? Without luggage, passports or even a water bottle, we could flap around the world and migrate with the seasons the way barn swallows do. But what if we could fly, and were afraid of heights?

In many ways, this is what people confront when trying to make a difference. It can be scary to make changes to our home, career, or behavior. Scientists don't really know what barn swallows think or feel, but it's possible some of them are afraid to migrate biannually for up to 7,500 miles with no guarantee they'll survive the journey. Unexpected storms, food shortages or predators could wipe them out, but their survival also depends on going. Our survival on earth depends on living sustainably and fixing the systems that pollute the world. By overcoming our fears, we can achieve great things – that's one reason we have airplanes!

Maybe barn swallows overcome their fear, too. Or perhaps they are excited to travel from the northern to the southern hemisphere and back each year, eager for a change. Scientists call the restlessness of migratory birds “zugunruhe” which is pronounced (at least to this non-German speaker) like soak-un-roo-ha with emphasis on the first syllable. Some are indeed obviously restless, and since they migrate during the day except over deserts, this behavior is more visible. Yet some barn swallows stay put. Certain populations in Egypt, Mexico and Spain don't migrate.

Most of them do, however. Barn swallows are among the most well-known migratory songbirds, and touch every continent except Antarctica. In the fall, this trek takes them roughly ten weeks. Spring migration is done twice as fast, partly due to the urge to breed. They begin shortly after dawn and end at dusk in large roosts of up to one million, according to the book “Animal Migration: Remarkable Journeys in the Wild” by Ben Hoare.

“The symbolic link between barn swallows and spring in Western culture dates back 2,500 years to Ancient Greece, and in the fourth century B.C.E. Aristotle became the first writer to correctly identify them as migratory,” Hoare writes. If the unusual freezing temperatures are making you yearn for spring (or the tropics) this book is worth a read when you're not browsing those spring seed catalogs! Barn swallows are considered harbingers of spring because they're insectivores; they depend on the insect swarms living in the air just above the earth. As warmer temperatures move northward, the birds follow the emerging insects.

We have much to learn from animal migration that can be applied to our personal lives as well as the sciences. The journey of barn swallows back to Arkansas this spring just might be the inspiration we need to begin making the world a better place for swallows and people alike. We've got the wings, all we need to do is overcome our fear of using them.

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