

In mid-April the swallows, the snipe and perhaps the cuckoo....

Most European languages have sayings about the arrival of Spring mentioning the birds and flowers which appear at that time. We are perhaps unique in having a saying in which a fish is a herald.

The orfi, garfish or snipe in English, used, in past times, to be a popular buy in the Fish Market, but now it is not so often consumed here. Modern taste sees it as too full of fishbones and it's blue-green colour isn't appetising, in fact the orfis appear mouldy.

In the Channel the orfis used to come into coastal waters close to our coast only after April in order to spawn and were often caught by fishermen after mackerel. But today they are also caught in winter.

The names, Chimney Swallow and Swallow of the Cartshed, that we have given to the swallow bear witness to their willingness to share our barns, our garages, our stables and even our houses during their stay in the Northern hemisphere.

Like us the swallows used to be cave nesters but since we began to construct our first shelters these birds found that the rafters under the roof were equally ideal for their nests.

Their charming twittering, reminiscent of running water, is a constant sound, especially when they gather on telegraph wires. Where did they congregate before the raising of the wires?

We welcome them around our houses as they hunt close to the earth and take a host of pestilential insects, flies, horseflies, and greenflies. Their elegant, agile flight, twisting and turning at full speed, without ever colliding and apparently without effort is a pleasure to watch.

And then - our third herald, the cuckoo, which inspires so many songs, poems and sayings all over Europe. It's arrival in April is eagerly anticipated and to have the first letter announcing hearing a cuckoo in the JEP or The Times is a source of pride. However we must be careful these days as we now have the Collared Dove here in Jersey since 1962 and their calls can sound very similar.

This bird is so symbolic of Spring that we have given it's name to lots of other flowers and birds of this season. For example, simply cuckoo for primroses, bluebells and violets. White Cuckoo is for Sea Campion and Red Cuckoo for Red Campion.

One of our names for the Meadow Pipit is 'Cuckoo Mother' owing to it being the cuckoo's preferred host.

The cuckoo chick throws out of the nest the rightful eggs of the pipit, then the adults work endlessly to feed their enormous foster-child. Cuckoo chicks have the remarkable ability to sound like 2 or 3 pipit chicks which cause the adults to feed it constantly. Happily, the meadow pipit has more than one nest per year and , with a little luck, the next nest will not get parasitised by a cuckoo.

Sadly it has not been proven that cuckoos have successfully bred here since 2009. We are seeing them and hearing them in their traditional haunts and there isn't a shortage of their preferred hosts. But no young cuckoos.

So what of the future? In 100 years will our saying still make sense? The orfi arrives earlier than April, the number of swallows and cuckoos in the world is suffering a huge decline. So, April might be very different.