

Feather Fascination!

with local Birdwatcher, Jim Butler



NEST FAUNA

The photo shows a happy scene! But note the two parasites attached to the baby Welcome Swallow which that morning left the nest. The parasite under the wing is probably a hippoboscid fly which has briefly come out from between the feathers.

Modern birds and their nests appeared amongst the dinosaurs about 65 million years ago. In 2012 a fossil bird's nest, originally made of sticks, was discovered in Spain, cradling at least five eggs that scientists believe belonged to an ancient flamingo 18 million years ago. Birds and nests, therefore, have been around long enough for the evolution of specialised parasites that live on birds and specialised animal communities that have adapted to life in bird's nests.

Bird parasites are predominately lice, mites and hippoboscid flies, with the occasional tick. Lice are common on wild birds. They spend their whole life on the bird, feeding on skin scales and feathers and laying their eggs along the shaft of

a feather. Mites are blood suckers. White Feather Mites do not live on the bird but make visits to feed at night and turn red when feeding. The small flat hippoboscid fly feeds on blood and lives between the feathers, sometimes flying out briefly and then darting back into the plumage.

The bird's nest itself contains damp animal and vegetable materials which provide an excellent food supply for a great many animal species which use the nest as a place to hibernate or to breed. In the latter case the larvae feed on debris in the bottom of the nest. This community of insects, mites, spiders and beetles forms a food web of herbivores and their predators.



So looking up at a nest high in a tree, imagine the community of life forms that are up there, on and around the birds.

Happy looking at nests

- Jim

Contact Jim: beautifulbirds@y7mail.com

Image: Welcome Swallows taken by Ed Frazer at Brookfield