

Birdlife in your Garden

The group of birds called *hirundines* consists of three common species in the UK – house martin, swallow and sand martin. Of these, the first is the most closely associated with humans and their dwellings. Their mud nests, tucked beneath the eaves of buildings, are a familiar sight in villages, towns and (if air pollution is not excessive) even large cities. House martins were originally cave and cliff dwellers (a few still are) but apparently made the switch to stone buildings soon after they became available. Certainly by the time Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth*, in the early 1600s, the practice was in evidence, as revealed by Banquo's comments to Duncan in Act 1 of the play when he remarks on the abundance of martins on the battlements of Cawdor Castle.

House martins are summer visitors to Britain, typically arriving from Africa early in April. After a few weeks feeding over wetlands, meadows and pastures, they will move to their traditional nesting sites, where they will often engage in a bit of avian DIY to repair the nest of a previous year. Nests are round and constructed of mud gathered in nearby puddles, ponds or streams: it takes about 1000 beakfuls (and about ten days) to create a nest from scratch. They prefer to attach nests to two surfaces at right angles to one another for structural strength, which is why house eaves are favoured. Nesting is usually communal, in small groups of ten pairs or less.

By September and October, flocks of twittering house martins will be common sights on telephone wires and similar perches as they prepare for the long and hazardous journey back to their wintering grounds.

House martins are smart birds with glossy blue-black backs and brilliant white underparts. They can be differentiated most easily from swallows by their bright white rumps and the notched (rather than forked) tail. If you see one perched, you may also note that their feet and legs are covered in white feathers. Like swallows, they spend much of their time on the wing, hunting their prey of airborne flies and aphids.

Whilst they are still quite abundant and widespread in Shropshire, there has been a disturbing 18% decline in numbers over the past ten years throughout Britain as a whole. The reason for this is unclear, but the British Trust for Ornithology is running a survey of house martins during 2015 and 2016 to which "citizen scientists" can contribute. If you would be interested in taking part, go to www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/house-martin-survey online or telephone 01842 750 050.

House martins are splendid birds to share your dwelling with. They may occasionally make a bit of a mess if a nest is over a door or pathway, but putting a board below the nest (in winter) to catch droppings can alleviate this. It is, of course, illegal to remove a nest that is under construction or occupied for any



Two broods of 4-5 eggs is normal for house martins. Here two youngsters await the next meal. Note the "knobbly" surface of the nest, each knob representing a beakful of mud. (Photo: John Harding, BTO Library)



A house martin in flight. Note the glossy blue-black back and white underparts and rump. A swallow would lack the light rump and would show long tail "streamers". (Photo: John W Walton, BTO Library)

reason, and doing so can attract significant fines. I don't have house martins on my house but I envy those who do. Their arrival heralds the coming balmy days of summer (we hope), their nests are marvels of avian engineering and a flock of flashing black and white birds displaying their aerial prowess above your garden (and eating your aphids!) is a joy to behold. Look out for them now and enjoy the spectacle!

John Arnfield

(The author is British Trust for Ornithology Ambassador for the Garden BirdWatch (GBW) scheme in southern Shropshire. We need more GBW volunteers in Shropshire. If you would like to help, or have questions about garden birds and feeding, please contact John on (01694) 724 170 or at arnfield.2@osu.edu.)