



House Martin Survey 2009 Newsletter



Thank You

The House Martin Survey seems to have struck a chord with over one thousand home-owners, many with stories to tell about their birds. We are grateful to everyone who has taken the trouble to fill in the form for 2009. You can see the first results from the survey below, with comparisons to last year's picture.

We plan to run the survey again in 2010 and, if we can find some funding, we should like to develop the scheme further. It would be great if we could collect information about arrival dates and the number of nesting attempts in different areas. This sort of study fits so well within the BTO's Out of Africa initiative, for which we have so far raised £75,000. With this money – and hopefully a lot more – we shall be looking at the challenges facing Cuckoos, Spotted Flycatchers, Swifts, Willow Warblers and other increasingly scarce summer migrants. See www.bto.org and click on Out of Africa.



House Martin by John Harding

Each of us has our own House Martin story to tell. For my wife and I, there was a late start to the spring. Each night I was looking at the bottom right corner of the weather map – focusing upon the system that was holding up our birds in Spain and Portugal. Once they did arrive, we had a very busy summer, with three broods in rapid succession. Now I am once more looking at the weather in Europe and wondering how our youngsters are coping with autumn storms. Migration is a tricky game to play; let's hope that there are more 'ladders' than 'snakes' for our House Martins over the next few months and that we see many of this year's youngsters back again next spring.

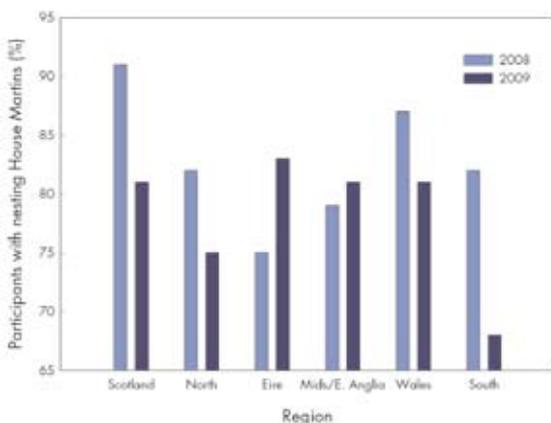
Graham Appleton

Results of the National Survey

Once again we had another fantastic response to this year's House Martin Survey, with almost 1,000 participants telling us about their House Martin nests.

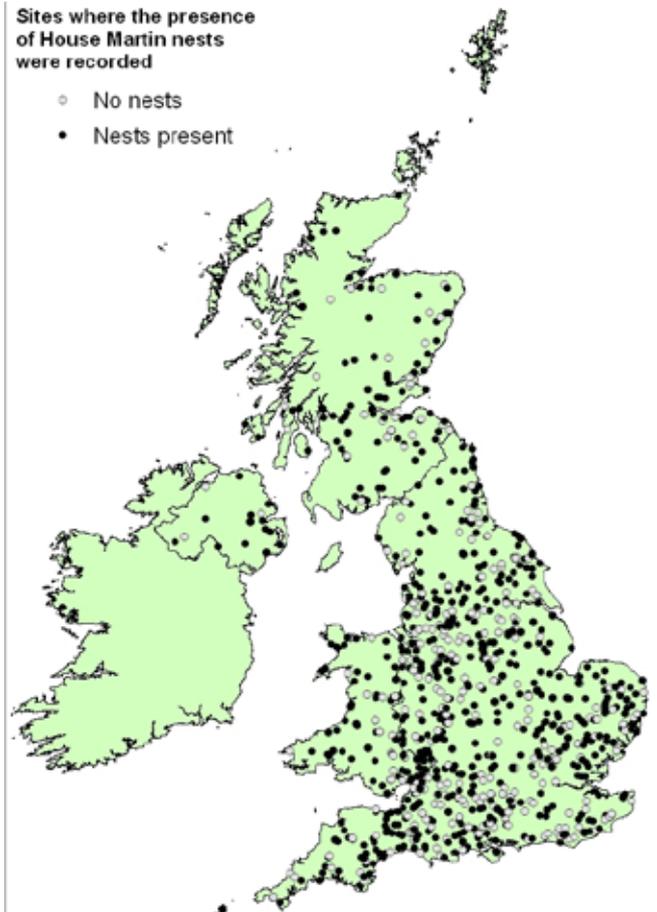
Of these participants, just over three-quarters (76%) had House Martins nesting on their houses in 2009, which is slightly lower than for the same buildings in 2008 (81%). Each building with nesting House Martins had an average of 3.4 occupied nests in 2009, which is similar to the 2008 average of 3.6.

The total number of active nests recorded during the 2009 survey was over 2,300. Most birds (75%) built new nests, although a quarter reused nests from previous years, showing that old nests are important for breeding House Martins; we can help these birds by leaving old nests in place for them to reuse in the future.



Sites where the presence of House Martin nests were recorded

- No nests
- Nests present



Regional Variations

There was quite a lot of variation in the number of nests reported in different regions:

- Ireland had the highest number of House Martin nests (83%) in 2009, and also showed an increase of 8% compared with 2008. This was closely followed by the Midlands and East Anglia where 81% of houses had nests (2% higher than in 2008).
- Other regions all had the same or slightly lower numbers of occupied nests in 2009 compared with 2008. The lowest numbers were reported in southern England, where only 68% of houses had nests in 2009; this region also showed the biggest decrease (-14%) between years.
- For buildings that did have House Martin nests, we also compared the average number of nests per region. Ireland had the highest number with 4.1, closely followed by southern England where the average was 4.0 per building. Northern England had the lowest number of nests per building (average 2.6), but for all regions, there was little change in the average number of nests per building in 2009 compared with 2008.

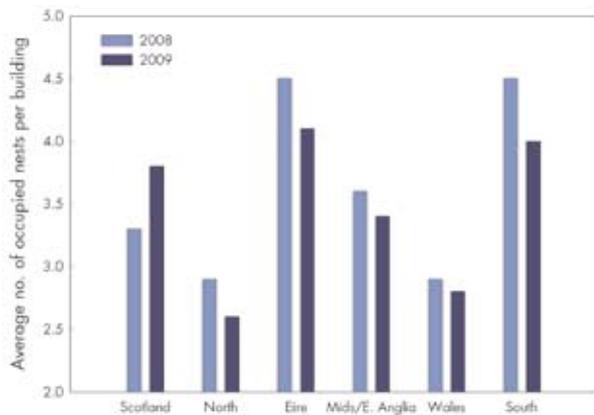


House Martin by Ben Davis/Judith Wood

Artificial Nests

Some participants also had one or more artificial House Martin nests in place on their homes; of all the nests that were reported in 2009, artificial nests made up 9%. Just under half of buildings with artificial nests had at least one of them occupied and, in total, artificial nests supported more than 200 breeding pairs. This shows that putting up artificial nests is very beneficial for breeding House Martins.

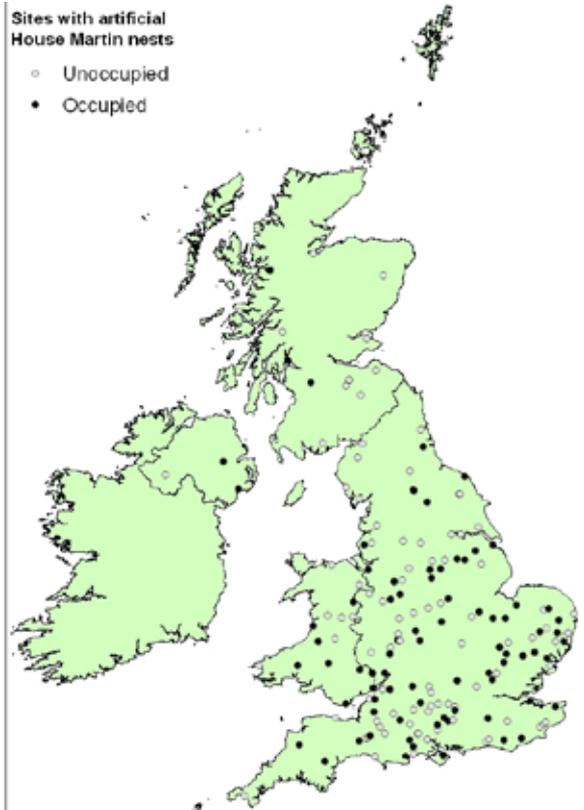
Liz Coiffait



With thanks to **Bryony Braschi** for setting up and maintaining the survey webpages.

Sites with artificial House Martin nests

- Unoccupied
- Occupied



Gardens are Great!

To House Martins, the best features of gardens are the conveniently placed 'cliffs', to which they can attach their nests, and the trees and bushes which release fresh supplies of aphids to be scooped up in flight. But gardens are great for lots of species, from the humble (but red-listed) House Sparrow to the delicate Spotted Flycatcher. Did you know that there are more Song Thrushes nesting in gardens than in the whole of the UK's farmland, that Great Spotted Woodpeckers are most commonly seen in gardens in June and that there has been a big drop in Greenfinch numbers in the last few years? We only know these facts because over 16,000 people choose to be part of Garden BirdWatch, the BTO survey of the weekly comings and goings within gardens.

To learn more about Garden BirdWatch visit www.bto.org/gbw or phone 01842 750050.



Great Spotted Woodpeckers by Jill Pakenham

Your News and Stories

Many thanks to all of you who have sent us your news, stories and pictures. We are sorry that we cannot print them all here, but we hope you enjoy this selection of some of those which particularly grabbed our attention.

Paul Stancliffe

Early Arrivals

Your email arrived the same day as a pair of House Martins! (03.04.09). It is the earliest date they have returned. It's usually the first week in May, and one year it was as late as July so these early arrivals are a wonderful surprise. It will be rewarding if we have more nests than last year, when only four were occupied. We've had as many as 17 nests several years ago but numbers at our house have declined. We never destroy the nests, although sometimes sparrows take up residence, only to be evicted upon the arrival of the House Martins! Their early arrival will hopefully mean more than one brood. They are a joy to watch and hear as we have a really good view from our first floor windows.

Paula O'Kane

Just to let you know that "the lads", as our House Martins are affectionately known, all arrived back here on Pen Llyn on 12 April! Last year it was 5 May and the year before 23 May – they're very early.

Lauren Smith, Pen Llyn



Photo by John Harding

We received as many emails telling us about the early arrival of House Martins back at nest sites this year as we did those relating to how late they were.

The picture of arrival was far from clear. Some parts of the country reported their earliest ever House Martins. One pair had started building a nest in the first week of April in Scotland, having arrived the week before, whilst others didn't arrive back until June.

Being a migrant from equatorial Africa, House Martins are subject to the vagaries of the weather on their journey north. Not all individuals leave the wintering areas at the same time. Those that left early this year (during February) managed to mostly miss any bad weather and consequently arrived back in the UK early. Those that left it a little later were held up by a severe storm south of the Sahara. Once the storm had cleared, birds again began to make their way north, only to be held up again by bad weather just north of the Pyrenees, eventually making it back to the UK several weeks later than the first arrivals, some of which had already fledged the first brood of youngsters.

Here are my records of dates when House Martins are first seen in our area of south Somerset:

2001 26 April	2002 11 April	2003 4 May
2004 13 April	2005 no record	2006 16 April
2007 19 April	2008 29 April	2009 12 April

Last year on our house we had four martins' nests under the front eaves (south facing) and two nests under the eaves at the rear of the house (north facing). This year, at the time of writing, we have just two nests in the front and one at the rear.

Les Farris, Somerset

It seems that the number of nests at Les's colony has remained fairly stable. However, from the number of messages we have received, highlighting how the number of nests has dropped over recent years, this is clearly not the case everywhere. House Martins are notoriously fickle and are known to abandon colonies and rebuild nearby. However, it is thought that the general decline is probably more to do with the poor summers that we have been experiencing, allowing fewer young birds to fledge and return to breed in subsequent summers. With a good run of summers House Martins do have the capacity to bounce back quite quickly, as they can have several broods in a year.

Out of Africa

I thought it might be of interest to the BTO to know that one pair of House Martins arrived yesterday (17.07.09) and took up residence in one of two artificial nests put up this year because the frost of last winter destroyed their natural nests.

What I would welcome is some indication as to what delayed my martins for so long. Last year they arrived early June which is particularly late (although in previous years they had been arriving later and later in May), but to only arrive now is extraordinary. Will the BTO be ringing or tracking such late arrivals to see from which part of Africa they migrate from as well as the route taken?

Shelley Saltman

These birds could be genuine late arrivals, or birds that have decided to move colonies for one reason or another. They might have failed due to predation of the nest or the nest might have fallen. It is difficult to say for certain why these birds are so late.

The BTO won't be targeting House Martins in particular for ringing but it is undertaking a project in West Africa this winter to find out more about our summer migrants in their winter quarters.

For more information on this, visit: www.bto.org and click on Out of Africa.

High Rise Martins

The House Martins (I think about six or eight) returned on 19 May, although my daughter believes she may have seen some a day or two before that. The existing nest was abandoned last year when cold, wet weather meant the brood did not hatch. This year, at least four House Martins seem to be involved in constructing a fresh nest on top of the old one - a sort of double-decker effect.

Dawn Perkins



Mud, Glorious Mud

On our walking trips around the area, we had noticed there had not been very much mud for House Martins to use. But luckily the last week or so has brought some heavy rain, and now they should be able to find plenty, as we are out in the country surrounded by farmland.

Joan



Photo by Derek Belsey

For House Martins to build nests there needs to be access to nearby mud (ideally within 250 m). If the mud is too far away it becomes unusable for nest building. A property might have the perfect eaves for martins to nest under but if there is no mud nearby they won't be able to use them. Martin Tickler has found a possible solution to this and a novel way of attracting the birds:

House Martins first attempted to nest here in 1983, with a single nest which fell at the egg stage due to the crumbly state of the brick work. A subsequent rendered extension in 1985 attracted four nests which were all immediately taken by House Sparrows and martins deserted the house. In subsequent years sparrows were discouraged - rubber plugs in nests over winter were helpful. By 1990 there were 17 occupied martin nests and this built up to 34 in a record year. Wetting mud is very important to success here as animals no longer trample pond margins. Artificial nests have been used for many years but not until I rubbed a rim of mud around the entrance and put streaks of white paint to indicate a 'successful' site.

Martin Tickler

House Martin History

I was thrilled to see in the newsletter a picture of 'Martin Manor'. Last year I had a similar occurrence but with an 'extension' to an original nest. I was fascinated by all the comings and goings and was happy to clean all the mess away as the House Martins had chosen the front of the house over the front door! My car was used for target practice, but luckily Mother and I were not used as targets.

My Mother is 87 and came from this area (Beachley) originally, leaving to join the WRAF during the second world war. She married my Father (RAF), who was a Londoner, so she never returned to live here until 12 years ago, to be nearer our relatives. Mother tells me that the House Martins always nested on the houses, barns and inside the bus shelters round here (Beachley lies between the River Wye and River Severn so the foreshore offers good supplies of mud) but she had never seen multiple constructions before.

We consider ourselves very lucky to be chosen by the House Martins and look forward every year to seeing them arrive, they travel such long distances and as Mother says they were here long before the houses were built!

Sandra Gregory, Beachley

Speedy Builders

House Martins are off to a slow start in Topcliffe this year as three self-built nests were lost during the winter. However, one nest was rebuilt in about 5 days, with apparently several birds (parents & last years young perhaps?) taking part. The photos show some of the activity and also the rate of building progress. Pictures taken just two days apart!

David Pilgrim, North Yorkshire



House Martins Ferry Well

These two stories were received by our Ringing Unit and are interesting reading:

Yesterday I crossed the Hardangerfjord (Western Norway) by ferry and counted at least five House Martin nests under the eaves of the ferry. The martins either stayed in the nest on the 20 minute crossing or stayed near land until the ferry returned.

Eddie Chapman, Voss, Norway.

Here in Estonia all ferries to the larger islands have nesting House Martins. The biggest distance is 22.5 km where the crossing takes about 1 hour 45 minutes. The birds are on or near the ship at all times.

Trinus Haitjema

Your Questions Answered

We have House Martins nesting on our house again (they have done so for at least the last three years since we have been here). This year there is an albino chick, is this unusual? It often lands on the roof above the nest and is fed there and sometimes flies at much lower levels. We were wondering if the eye-sight is effected by being albino? We are not sure if it manages to get back in to the nest at dusk.

Helen Yelland

True Albinism is not at all common in birds but does occur from time to time and in all species. The eyesight doesn't seem to be affected as these birds do seem able to feed as well as normal individuals, although some aviculturists report problems with cage bred albino birds. The biggest problem white birds face is being caught by predators as they stand out from the crowd.

As far as returning to the nest at night. The young only do this for the week or so after fledging, and even then not every night. This bird will almost certainly stay with the family group and follow them in.



Albino House Martin by Helen Yelland

This morning I watched a House Martin remove two very young chicks from the nest attached to our house and drop them on the patio below. I have never seen them behave in this way. Do I assume this is a male (or part of a pair) vying for the same nest?

Shelley Nott

It is possible that another pair were trying to take over the nest but it is also possible that this was one of the resident pair removing dead chicks from the nest. This would allow the pair to lay a new clutch and begin a second brood. It is widely known that birds will remove dead young from the nest. Many Blue Tits have been watched doing this, using nest cameras, then continuing to tend to the remainder of the brood.

Our House Martins were very late, some only getting back by late May. We have the first young flying from eight nests. All but one are man made. If the weather stays good we may fly off a minimum of 30 this year assuming two broods of at least two. It could be as many as twice that. Do you know if all the young fledge together? I get the feeling that they fly over an extended period of some days. We seem to have some newly fledged birds in the three spare boxes, whilst the original nests still have young being fed. The local Swifts seem to be hassling the martins, flying full tilt past the house and maybe looking for a nest site. Any ideas on how to attract them to the boxes I have made and fixed?

Ian Chapple

Generally young House Martins will fledge at the same time, or at least within a few hours of each other. Once fledged they can return to the nest from time to time over the next few days.

Swifts can be attracted to nest boxes by playing a recording of Swift calls during the early part of the season (May and early June).

On 10th May, our House Martins arrived and built a perfect nest on our south facing gable and went away. Two weeks later, more House Martins arrived and built a perfect nest on our north facing gable and also went away. We have seen nothing of either group since and no use of the nests. We wondered if this is because we are in the territory of a Sparrowhawk?

Bill Roberts, Whiting Bay, Isle of Arran

It is unlikely that the Sparrowhawk was the cause of your martins abandoning the nests. Many pairs successfully nest within the territories of Sparrowhawks across the country. There can be many reasons that might cause birds to abandon, the loss of one of the pair, a change in the weather making food hard to find, or indeed disturbance from other martins and House Sparrows.

My neighbours and some other houses a few doors down have House Martins nesting, which is wonderful, but I have to add my concerns for some nest sites here that may be destroyed. I have managed to slip into conversations with my neighbours how it is illegal to destroy nests. It appears that many people were unaware of this. I was wondering what could be done to educate people who have House Martins nesting in their area about the laws on nest destruction etc.?

Emma Davies, Elgin, Moray

All breeding birds are protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981. Under this act, it is illegal to disturb any breeding bird. Anyone doing so is liable to prosecution. Most counties now have a Wildlife Liaison Officer attached to the Police who can offer advice in cases like this.

I am very excited to have moved in to a house which has a House Martin nest. My neighbours also have a nest but they are not so keen about having these amazing birds for neighbours. They had suggested that a 'friend of theirs' had removed the nests! It made me wonder, are the nests of House Martins protected even after the nesting season?

Ellis Selway

Outside of the breeding season (1 August - 31 January) House Martin nests are not protected. If maintenance work on the property needs to be carried out this is the only time that the nests can be disturbed.

We received this photograph from Andrew Schrage asking what we thought these birds were doing, as they seemed to be pecking at the mortar. They are taking advantage of the small ledges that the mortar offers and the opportunity to enjoy a good feather preening session in this lovely sunny spot. If you look closely birds can be seen stretching their wings and turning their heads onto their backs.



Diary of a House Martin

Thought you'd be interested in these photos my daughter has taken in our garden.

Jean Turner, Market Rasen, Lincolnshire

Jean's House Martins built this nest from scratch in 16 days, they obviously have a good supply of mud nearby. The average is 10 days and it can take anywhere between eight and 18 days depending on the weather; building will be suspended in bad weather.

2 June 2009



11 June 2009



12 June 2009



18 June 2009



Bird Atlas 2007-11

The BTO is working with the Scottish Ornithologists' Club and Birdwatch Ireland to create new distribution maps for every species of bird to be found in Britain. The half-way point has now been reached, and so far over 3 million records have been received and over 97,000 timed counts in 2km by 2km squares have been carried out. This amounts to 68% of the breeding counts and 65% of the winter counts being completed to date. There are still many areas that need to be covered before the end of the project in 2011.

To see how you might be able to help fill in the gaps, please visit www.birdatlas.net, or phone 01842 750050 and ask for more information.

The British Trust for Ornithology is a Registered Charity, No. 216652 (England & Wales), No. SC039193 (Scotland)
Company Limited by Guarantee No. 357284 (England & Wales)
Write to: BTO, The Nunnery, Thetford, Norfolk, IP24 2PU
Phone: 01842 750050 Fax: 01842 750030
Email: info@bto.org Website: www.bto.org