



House Martin Survey 2010 Newsletter



Thank You

Once again the response to the House Martin survey has been fantastic, and we would like to take the opportunity to thank everyone who has taken part this year. For a bird that lives so closely to us we really know very little about them. Are second broods just that, or are they late broods for a different pair? We think that it is probably a little of both but more research needs to be done to be absolutely sure.



Doug Welch

Over 800,000 House Martins have been ringed in the UK but there has only been one recovered south of the Sahara Desert. Consequently we don't know precisely where British House Martins spend the winter months.

Why do House Martins have feathered feet? We normally associate birds and feathered feet with cold conditions, think Ptarmigan and Snowy Owl. Swifts also have feathered legs and feet and it is thought that this might be an adaptation to roosting high on the wing, keeping their feet warm. Could some House Martins also do this?

These really are fascinating birds and thanks to the House Martin survey we are able to understand a little more about them while they are with us for the summer months.

Paul Stancliffe

Results of the National Survey

The number of participants telling us about their House Martin colonies in 2010 was less than half of that in 2009 and consequently the total number of nests recorded was well down at 970, compared with over 2,300 last year. At this stage,

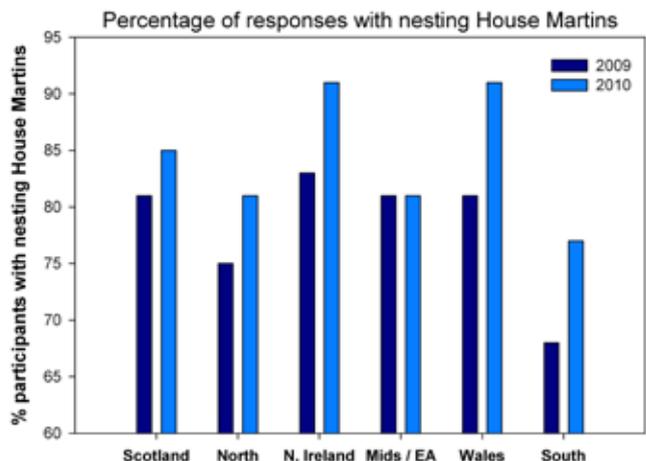
Sites where the presence of House Martin nests were recorded

- No nests
- Nests present



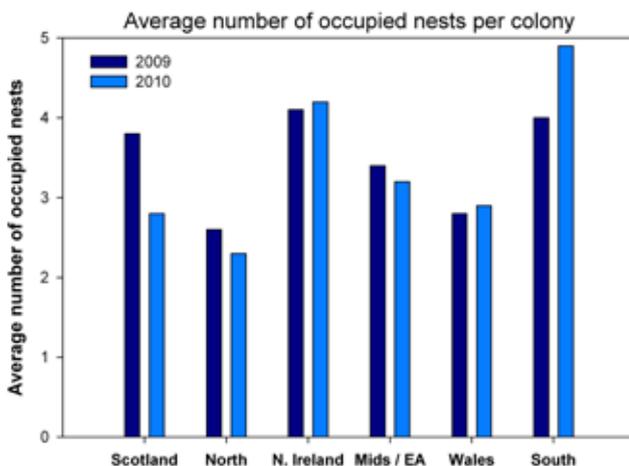
we are unsure whether the small number of people taking part was because there were fewer House Martins breeding in the country this year, or for some other reason. We do know, however, that

the proportion of responses that were from people who did have nesting House Martins (82%) was slightly higher than last year (76%) and about the same as in 2008 (81%). The number of active nests per building (3.4) was the same as last year and very similar to 2008 (3.6). Again, like last year, and contrary to last year's report, 25% of nesting attempts were in newly-made nests. So there is no evidence that colony size has declined or that birds had trouble finding nest building material. The number of reports from colonies that lost their House Martins this year was very similar to that from houses that had gained them since last year. So, there appears to be some re-distribution going on, although of course people may be more likely to tell us about colonisations than abandonments.



Regional Variations

As last year, the south had the lowest proportion of houses with breeding House Martins in 2010 (see graph on page 1), although this was up a bit at 77%. Ireland, again, and Wales had the highest proportion of occupied houses this year, up to 91% in both cases. Despite having the lowest proportion of occupied houses, the south had the greatest number of nests per house - an average of 4.9 compared to 2.3 in the north, which again had the lowest.



With House Martins experiencing a much better summer this year, it looked as if they might have a bumper breeding season. However, the northerly winds that brought clouds of volcanic ash into British airspace and caused huge disruption to travellers, also brought disruption to House Martins making their way north and many found it difficult to make headway. Consequently many turned up late and some not at all. As can be seen from the graph, this resulted in a very similar year to 2009, with only the south doing marginally better.

Artificial Nests

Some 224 artificial nests were provided and just over half of these were reported as being used this year. The number of artificial nests provided at sites where at least one was used (average 4.6) was higher than at sites where they weren't (average 2.0), so providing more might increase the chances of House Martins using them!

Sites with artificial House Martin nests

- Unoccupied
- Occupied



Every year we receive reports of nests failing because they have fallen from the eaves. Putting up artificial nest cups is one way of overcoming this problem. Note that the birds will still need access to mud. As can be seen in the accompanying photograph, the martins still like to customise the entrance hole to the nest by adding their own balls of mud.

By using an artificial nest the martins will save themselves around ten days of nest building time. This could also give them more time to produce more than one brood over the summer months.



Doug Welch

Martins go, birdwatchers remain

House Martins are fantastic at making our houses their homes, arriving as early as March and departing with the blowing of the autumnal winds. They and other species breed in large numbers in our gardens, and our management of these habitats – the plants we grow, the bird food we supply, the pets we keep, the nest sites we provide – could have a substantial impact on their breeding success. The BTO is at the centre of research to monitor breeding birds in urban areas with our new Nesting Neighbours initiative. Now, however, as the nights draw in and even the Woodpeckers think about stopping laying, armchair

birdwatchers up and down the land are keeping a close eye on our confiding feathered companions. The BTO Garden BirdWatch is the largest year-round survey of garden birds in the world and has revealed stunning seasonal variations in the use of gardens by birds as well as dramatic long-term increases (e.g. Goldfinch, Long-tailed Tit) and declines (e.g. House Sparrow, Starling). The survey relies on the simple, scientific observations of householders – to make your garden count email gbw@bto.org or phone 01842 750050.

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.

Last to fledge

Terry was able to take a photograph yesterday (21st Sept) of the two chicks from the second brood who are still in the nest and being fed by their parents. Hopefully they will fly soon. Will they have sufficient time to fledge and get strong enough and sufficiently proficient before setting off on their long journey south?

Sue and Terry Turner

These youngsters should fledge in plenty of time to be able to gain the muscle and fat content to allow them to begin their migration to Africa. Late House Martins are often a feature of visible migration during the second and third weeks of October. (Eds)

!Stop Press!

Dear BTO

Our last lot of fledgling House Martins have departed (Thursday 30th September).

Jeff Martin



Nest predators

We have received a number of stories of nests being predated by a variety of predators that included Tawny Owl, Great Spotted Woodpecker, Sparrowhawk and Magpie. Here are two of those stories.

Earlier in the year I saw a Sparrowhawk fly up to the nest of one of the first broods to take the young from the nest and in the process damage the nest. I believe this happened to two other self-build nests, one of which was eventually rebuilt and the second brood reared successfully. The same

thing happened last year, the Sparrowhawk taking young from and damaging three nests. A friend who also lives in the village also saw a Sparrowhawk take young from nests on her house, damaging the nests in the process.

Rosemary Rooke

This year we had 12 martin nests with young at the end of June. During the nights of the 23rd and 24th June seven nests containing young were destroyed and the young eaten. We had a similar experience four years ago and blamed Little

Owls. During the night of 26th June at around 5am we disturbed a Magpie attacking a nest on the south facing aspect, the nest and young have survived (this nest is near our bedroom window and yes we did see a Magpie). There

was only a small amount of damage done to the nest entrance before our shouts put off the intruder and we have been hanging yellow dusters from the bedroom windows ever since, which seems to work, touch wood.

Ray Smith

Unusual fatality

I saw a House Martin hanging from a nest on the house earlier this week. Too high to reach but obviously dead. I finally managed to hook it down with a long pole. On inspection, one foot was well tied with a single filament of blue thread. Judging from the difficulty I had in extricating the bird, I've come to the conclusion that the thread was used as part of the nesting material and was therefore well cemented into the mud wall. I think the dead bird had probably grown in the nest with its foot in the thread, which was of no consequence until it tried to leave and found itself trapped.

I'm not sure if House Martins regularly use fibres mixed with mud to form their nests. About two years ago one pair decided to stuff their nest with grass which they did to such effect that it pushed it off the building!

Richard Hall

The mud-pellet nest often contains down, feathers, animal hair and other light material. The lining material is collected in the air or is often stolen from the nests of other martins. (Eds)



A helping hand

House Martins have been collecting nesting materials (mud and fibrous materials) from the track by my home. I have made sure there is wet ground by running the hose down my drive during dry spells.

Doug Welch

I can confirm that a single House Martin arrived here (between Ponteland and Belsay, North'land) yesterday (Monday 26th April 2010) and that a further two have arrived this morning.

It is so nice to see them again as they swoop down to greet me (I mimic their call when in the garden and they come - silly, I know but that is me.) The ground is very dry so I am watering every morning to make some mud for them if needed.

Jason l'Anson



Doug Welch

House Sparrows a problem

After a little nagging (!!) my husband got the ladders out last Sunday (25th) and put our House Martin boxes back up. (I find the House Sparrows take them over if we leave them up over the winter.) Yesterday morning, 20 hours after they were installed, five House Martins turned up and have taken residence in at least two boxes. I will keep you posted.

Sally Bell

Nest predators

We have had four artificial nest boxes for about seven years and they were used, even in the first year, you might like to tell people. This followed 30 years of living here and never even seeing a House Martin in that time! Some years two of the four boxes have been used, but usually it is just one. However, we have had up to eight or ten martins looking in all the boxes at the start of a season. One thing people need to think about is which way the boxes face - ours face east and slightly north and they are in a corner. The wall is white rendering which they also seem to like from my observations around the countryside.

Dinah Schubert

Everybody needs good neighbours

This photograph was sent to us by David Bradshaw. It is of the House Martin nests on his cousin's farmhouse. There are 35 nests on the house. Could this be the biggest colony on a house in the UK?

It is certainly the biggest reported to the House Martin survey (Eds).

A number of House Martin surveyors not only send in observations from their own properties, they keep an eye on their neighbours' nests too!

"House Martins returned on the 19th April which was about three days later than last year. We also had a second batch on the 26th May – the latter looked at all the taken nests and have started to build one additional new nest.

Nests in the close:

No. 2 – one nest (bungalow)

No. 4 – one nest

No. 5 – three nests

No. 7 – one original nest and the new nest

No. 8 – five nests (my house)

No. 9 – one nest (bungalow)

All the nests are active and have young in, most look as though they are ready to fledge except the new nest."

Barbara Bennett

Your Questions Answered

Q. What happens if the returning birds don't make an exact number of breeding pairs? What do the odd ones out do? What do the first broods do when second or third ones arrive?

Rosanna Barton

A. This scenario is not uncommon early in the breeding season. The dominant birds will soon see off any interlopers, that will then either try their luck elsewhere in the colony, or at colonies nearby.

By the time second broods hatch the young from the first brood are independent. However, there is evidence to suggest that sometimes the young from the first brood help with the feeding of the second brood.



Q. I have a House Martin nest that is at least eight years old. It was used last year for the first time in about 3–4 years and during the non-nesting years it nevertheless seemed to be visited on odd days by birds as if it were a temporary hostel. When the young are fledged, do they return to the nest for a period before they migrate?

Roy Wall

A. Once fledged the young birds will stay in the vicinity of the nest site, often returning to the nest and even roosting in the nest during the night. After a few days this behaviour diminishes and the young go off with the adults to forage and roost further afield. It is not recorded exactly how long it is before the young become fully independent but is thought to be around two to three weeks after fledging

Q. I visited an elderly lady last week who was telling me that for the first time in her memory there are no House Martins nesting in her eaves. She has lived in the house for 70 plus years! She wondered if it had anything to do with the volcanic ash cloud. Can you help?

Julie Harding

A. This is probably the most frequently asked question this year. Indirectly the volcanic ash cloud was responsible for these birds not turning up. The strong northerly winds that brought the ashcloud into British airspace would have made it difficult for birds heading north from Africa to continue their journeys - straight into a strong headwind. This was in fact the case and migration was slow for most of May: some birds were very late arriving, whilst others didn't turn up at all.



Q. We have seen three martins flying up to our two artificial nests but are not sure if they are using both of them. The first sighting we had of them was on 20th April. When my husband took the nest boxes down for cleaning he found a single pipistrelle bat hibernating in one. He returned the nest box immediately. We don't know if it is still there or if it would put the martins off using it. Have you had reports of this occurrence before?

Ann Hawes

A. This is the first time this has been reported to the House Martin survey.

Q. I have been given a House Martin nest box is it too late to put it up? (Received on 6th June)

John Lord

A. Providing other nests won't be disturbed by the action of putting the nest box up, mid-summer would be a good time to put up the artificial nest as it is then possible for it to be checked out by birds in readiness for next year's breeding season.

Q. Last year one of the neighbours found a youngster that had fallen out of the nest. Aware that there are a few cats about, she didn't know what to do with the chick – either leave it to the fate of the cats or put it up fairly high and

hope that 'mum' would be able to sort it out. The chick disappeared but we don't know if it was with mum or the cats!!

If this situation occurs again, what advice can you give me to deal with the chicks that end up out of the nest?

Mick Smith

A. By far the best thing to do is to get the young back in the nest. If this is not possible, because the nest is damaged, an artificial nest can be put up close to the damaged nest. This has proved successful in the past.

House Martin Diary

Rest from nest building



Caught in flight



Open wide



'Chocks away'



All above photographs by Doug Welch

Bird Atlas 2007–11

This enormous undertaking, to create new distribution maps for every bird species to be found in Britain, is reaching its final stages. The 1st of November 2010 will see the start of the very last winter's fieldwork.

To see how you might be able to help fill any remaining gaps, please visit www.birdatlas.net, or phone 01842 750500 and ask for more information.

Out of Africa

Many of our breeding House Martins will be well on their way to Africa but it is still a mystery as to where in this vast continent their journey will end. Many of our summer migrants are experiencing alarming declines and so it is vital that we understand the pressures they are facing in Africa.

The BTO *Out of Africa* project will help to do just this. For more information, please visit, http://www.bto.org/appeals/out_of_africa_appeal.htm

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