

HMSnews

The newsletter of the BTO House Martin Survey

Spring 2013



Tough times for House Martins?

Summer 2012 proved to be a tough one for House Martins and many other migrants seeking to make the most of our northern 'temperate' summer. Newly returned birds, arriving later than is usual, often faced challenging weather conditions, as week after week of cold, wet and windy weather set the tone for the 2012 nesting season.

The number of active House Martin nests reported through the BTO House Martin Survey was down slightly on the previous year and a number of sites used in 2011 were abandoned in 2012. On average, there were 4.8 nests per house in the south of England but just 3.5 nests per house in northern England. In Wales the average was 3.2 nests per house and at 2.5, Scotland had the lowest number of nests per house.



JOHN HARDING

The damp summer provided plenty of mud.

Whilst many people were concerned that they had lost their House Martins, others gained them, so it seems that our House Martins may be just about holding their own. While the 2012 breeding season didn't break any records it wasn't the worst we have experienced.



Some of our returning House Martins and Swallows arrived to face difficult weather conditions, including very heavy rain. Faced with such conditions, some birds sought shelter on window frames and ledges in an attempt to keep out of the worst of the weather. David Jackson photographed these birds in Mevagissey, Cornwall, doing just this. The photograph was taken on 15th May 2012, when the weather in southwest England was being particularly unseasonal.



NATIONAL RESULTS SUMMARY

The number of participants telling us about their House Martin colonies (or lack of them) in 2012 (364) was slightly down on 2011 (475), but in line with the figure for 2010 (365). Consequently the total number of nests recorded (1,099) was also down, although the proportion of sites with active House Martin nests (87%) was similar to the figure for 2011 (85%), remaining higher than in previous years (76% in 2010).

Of all participants, 77% reported nesting for two years in a row, whilst the number of new sites was very high (58). This was offset by 23 sites where birds bred in 2011 but not 2012, and further sites had been unoccupied for longer: last occupied in 2010 (three sites), 2009 (two sites), 2007 (one site), 2000 (two sites) and last occupied pre-2000 (three sites).

The number of active nests per house was slightly down at 3.8, compared to 4.2 in 2011, although was still higher than previous years (3.4 in 2010). Of these, on average 2.9 per house were reused nests and just 1.1 on average were newly built.



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On the move – but where?

We know surprisingly little about what happens to this iconic summer visitor once it has left our shores ...

Chris Hewson, BTO Senior Research Ecologist, International Research

The House Martin is an iconic summer visitor to British and Irish gardens whose numbers are in decline. According to figures from the BTO/JNCC/RSPB Breeding Bird Survey, the UK House Martin population has declined by 13% over the last 5 years. However, our understanding of the causes that lie behind this decline is hampered by the fact that we know very little about what House Martins do during the majority of the year when they are not in this country. For instance, there has been just one sub-Saharan recovery of a British-ringed House Martin.

The missing millions

Despite many thousands of House Martins being ringed in Britain each year, their African wintering grounds are completely unknown. This is partly because the species is poorly-known in the non-breeding season, as relatively few are observed in Africa compared to the millions that winter in the continent. This has led to speculation that they might spend long periods feeding at high altitude, including above the rainforest, where they remain unnoticed.

Although there have been some recoveries of British-ringed House Martins in Europe and North Africa, their migration strategies and routes north of the Sahara are also

poorly understood. Fortunately, new developments in tracking technologies provide an opportunity for us to finally answer this long-unanswered question.

With your help we aim to identify the migration strategies and routes, stop-over locations and wintering areas of House Martins breeding in the UK. This will provide important information to help our understanding of the British population.

Tracking martins

The development of tiny tracking devices, known as geolocators, has revolutionised our understanding of how small birds migrate to and from Africa. These devices, no bigger than a shirt button (see photo), have an inbuilt electronic calendar, a clock and a light sensor that constantly monitors the daylight against the clock and the calendar and stores that information. Once the bird returns to Britain, scientists can remove the device, download the data and work out where on the planet the geocator was at any given time and date.



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MAP FROM 'TIME TO FLY', PUBLISHED BY BTO

You can help solve the mystery of where House Martins spend the winter and how they get there.

How you can help

As a participant in the House Martin Survey you have helped to build a clear picture of what is happening to House Martins in the United Kingdom and Ireland. Now you can help broaden that picture to show, for the first time, where House Martins go in the winter. Geolocators are key to unlocking this mystery. We have already used these tags successfully on Nightingales and Swifts and now have an opportunity to use them on House Martins. We need to raise just under £10,000 to purchase 20 geolocators and fit them to House Martins this summer, before recatching the birds next summer to remove the devices and download the data they contain.

If you would like to help with this ground-breaking research, please do so:

By post: Please send a cheque payable to 'The British Trust for Ornithology' to House Martin Appeal, The Nunnery, Thetford, Norfolk, IP24 2PU.

Online: www.bto.org/donate (please select 'House Martin Appeal' in the box for donation type).

By phone: Please call our fundraising team on 01842-750050 to make a donation by card over the phone. Thank you, your support will be very much appreciated, and if you supply an email address when making a donation we will update you on how the tagging goes this summer.

With just a single record of a British-ringed House Martin from south of the Sahara, we have no idea where our House Martins spend the winter. Understanding where these iconic birds winter, and how they get there, could be key to understanding why their breeding populations – both here and elsewhere within Europe – are in decline.

With your help we can answer these questions and support appropriate conservation action.

SUMMER 2012 RESULTS...

By Paul Stancliffe, House Martin Survey organiser

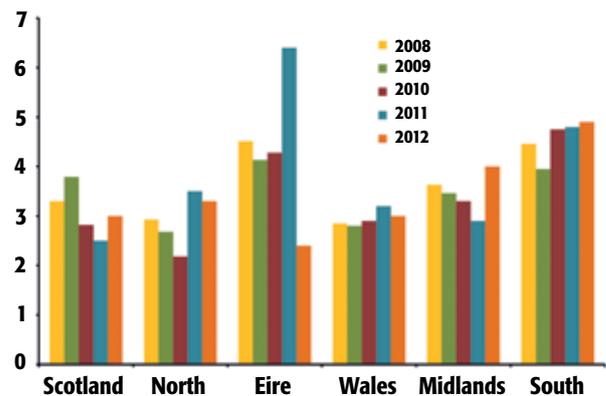
Thank you to everyone who took part in 2012. As I write this there is snow on the ground and the midday temperature is -1°C and yet the first House Martin of the year has already been seen. However, spring migration is very slow this year, with many of the early migrants running around two weeks late. Their journey from their wintering grounds in Africa will have been a little easier than last spring, when the weather in southern Europe at this time was appalling. The cold conditions here in the UK won't last though, and once it clears, birds that have been held up in France and Spain will make their final push to their breeding territories, albeit a little later than usual.

Regional variation

Contributions to the survey were topped by those from the Midlands and East Anglia, with details from 103 sites submitted, followed by southern England (98 sites), northern England (68), Scotland (36), Wales (34) and Ireland (6). The proportion of occupied sites was highest in Scotland (94% of sites), continuing the rise in occupation seen last year. This was followed by 90% occupation in the south and 86% in the Midlands/East Anglia. The lowest occupancy rate was still a notable 84% in the north (not taking into account the small sample size from Ireland).

The increase in Scotland was driven by the occupation of new sites in 2012, with 38% of sites being used for the first time, compared to just 13% in the Midlands and 16-19% in other regions. The average number of nests per site remained highest in the south (4.9, slightly higher than the figure of 4.8 last year) and the Midlands (4.0 nests per site in the compared to 2.9 last year), with lower numbers in the north (3.3, a slight decrease on the 2011 figure) and Scotland (3.0,

The average number of House Martin nests per site



compared to 2.5 last year), and fewer than three nests per site in Ireland and Wales.

Artificial nests

In total 319 artificial nests were provided at 46 different sites in 2012 (compared to 350 nests in 2011), with 156 (49%) of these going on to be occupied. On average, sites where artificial nests were provided had five such nests and an average of 3.4 used, reflecting a high take-up rate of artificial nests at sites where the birds were present.

The number of artificial nests was highest in the Midlands/East Anglia (at 27), but the take-up rate was highest in the north, where 73% of the 11 nests provided were occupied: take-up in the Midlands/East Anglia was 67%. Just two artificial nests were provided in Ireland (neither were occupied) and four in Scotland (50% occupation), whilst take-up rates were also low in Wales (just three out of eight nests provided).

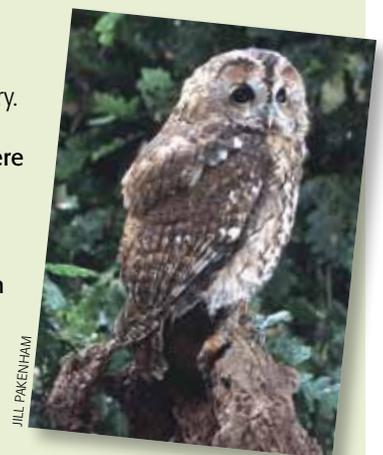
TAWNY OWLS

Last year we talked about the problem with House Sparrows competing for the martin nests. This year, Silvia Fowler told us about a very different problem affecting the second broods in her nests. Silvia takes up the story.

After filling in your on-line survey, I just wanted to give you some more details about our House Martins this year. They arrived about 1-2 weeks late and in much reduced numbers. Their breeding success has also been very poor this year with only five nests producing single broods. I think the clutches were smaller too, as evidenced by two collapsed nests which only contained three dead chicks. This is our third year in this property during which we have witnessed a marked decline in our House Martin colony. In 2010 there were 10 nests, eight of which produced two broods, the other two falling victim to Tawny Owl predation. In 2011, again 10 nests were occupied which all produced one brood. Only five or six of the second broods were successful, again due to predation by Tawny Owls.

This year only seven nests were claimed, two of which were on a south-facing wall. Both nests collapsed and were rebuilt twice; these pairs then made no further breeding attempts. The other five nests, positioned on a north-facing wall, produced one small brood each. We think that there were three attempted second broods, but these fell victim to the Tawny Owls.

Tawny Owls are known to raid House Martin nests at night, something that often goes unnoticed.



JILL PAKENHAM

HOUSE MARTINS - YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED

Q: John Bell (Cambridgeshire) – I wonder what is going on! Our House Martins left us on 22nd September, later than usual but then they arrived late this spring. However as I look out of my window, 3rd October, they have all just arrived back again. Have they encountered adverse weather conditions on the way to Africa and decided that it was better to turn back, feed themselves up and try their luck later? Is this pattern repeating itself elsewhere?

A: In the eleven days between your birds leaving the nests and their return, they will have been feeding up at favoured feeding sites in the local area. Both the adults and young will have been building up their reserves for the long flight south. Spells of inclement weather during this time can result in the birds returning to the colony...

Q: Janet Rymer-Jones – About five years or so ago I was in contact with you regarding House Martins because my daughter had given us an artificial nest. Martins nested there the first year but since then, although they have investigated it, none have actually 'moved in'. This year a pair arrived on 11th June, which I guess is pretty late, and have nested in it. My question is, should we have taken it down and cleaned it out after the last pair and young left? We have to get a builder to actually put the nest up, we are a bit past climbing ladders to the eaves of the house, but would happily clean it out if it would mean we have House Martins each year!

A: During the winter months a lot of the material left in the nest at the end of the breeding season will be broken down by some of the nest parasites. Returning House Martins will also carry out some spring cleaning

How good are artificial nests?

House Martin survey participant Bob Crook tells us about his colony

My first arrival was on the 6th May but by the 12th May there were six pairs nesting. With the artificial nests, as soon as the birds arrive they have a roost and can start laying. By early June there were 15 pairs active and, judging by the egg shells on the ground, doing well. By the end of June we were up to 26 pairs. The only mud nest was repaired and in use, all the others in artificial sites. There were no attempts to build any other mud ones, which was a surprise with it being so wet and there being so much mud around.

In August the late arrivals turned up, another three pairs, which filled in some of the unused nests on the north side bringing the total number of occupied nests to 29. It was also the time when the second broods started (15 this year). The fate of the single mud nest was unfortunate, with part of the nest falling away. Perhaps the very wet weather was to blame. By early September a lot of the youngsters and adults had left, with the final birds departing by the 20th September. A single stray was seen on the 29th of the month using one of the nests as a temporary roost.

prior to egg laying. So, it is not absolutely necessary to clean out the nest. However, if it is not too difficult, cleaning out the nest can reduce the nest parasite load for the subsequent breeding season. Nests should only be cleaned out between 1st August and 31st January.

Q: Fiona McIntyre – I have just been reading the House Martin newsletter with interest. I moved into my current house last summer and was delighted to find a pair of House Martins already in residence. I missed the young fledging but am sure they did as there was much activity and noise immediately prior to inactivity and silence at the nest, and rows of youngsters on the telephone lines over the garden. I was looking forward to their return this year, but was equally pleased when a pair of Swallows took up residence instead. The House Martins returned a few days later than the Swallows and 'hirundine' war broke out! The House Martins were not at all pleased to find squatters. A few days of unpleasantness and the House Martins won back their nest. Is this common? The site is not what I would imagine Swallows would really like. It is in the apex of an overhang on the gable end. It is a bit wider overhang than in many houses, but definitely not inside or fully under cover.

A: It is not unusual for a returning pair of martins to have to fight to regain their nest site, with House Sparrows the most likely squatters. It is unusual for the interlopers to be Swallows as the site isn't a typical Swallow nest site. It is not too surprising that the House Martins eventually won the day though as they would be defending their own site.



DOUG WELCH

Last year, 2011, we had 23 active nests with eight second broods. We anticipated an increase of 25% in the colony size for 2012, which would mean 29 nests, and this is what we actually saw. Using the same rough guide, and with the fairly high number of second broods, we would be looking at 36 nests or so for 2013. The house already has 37 nests but I do think it is a good idea to have 'spares' since it seems they are used by single adults and the young ones to roost or rest in. When cleaning all the nests out the unused ones often contain the odd feather or dropping.

I am sure that without the use of the artificial nests the colony would not have continued to grow and it is interesting to note that there are only a few other single nests in the village. It seems, for my colony at least, artificial nests make an important contribution to its success.