

# UK HOUSE MARTIN SURVEY 2015

## GUIDELINES FOR SURVEYING IN RESIDENTIAL AREAS



### INTRODUCTION

As House Martins nest on buildings, volunteers should bear in mind that they will be undertaking survey work in close proximity to private properties and recording information about birds nesting on these properties. Please keep to public rights of way and public access land, and seek permission if you need to access private land.

Volunteers are asked not to put themselves in a position which could place them, or others, in danger. The BTO's general guidance for volunteers contains the following advice under the section 'Human confrontation':

*"Consider your personal safety when conducting fieldwork within the vicinity of known or likely trouble spots. Avoid confrontation with landowners, land workers or members of the public. Consider the privacy of residents when performing early-morning survey work in residential areas. Carry some form of identification to confirm the activities you are undertaking. If you have any concerns about your personal safety, cease fieldwork immediately".*

This document aims to provide additional advice to address some of the potential concerns about surveying in residential areas that may be held by participants in the 2015 House Martin survey.

These additional guidelines focus on concerns related to privacy and interaction with members of the public, and do not cover other issues that may be relevant to survey volunteers. For more general Health and Safety advice, please make sure you have read BTO's guidance for volunteers (available at <http://www.bto.org/volunteer-surveys/taking-part/health-safety>) or request a hard copy from [housemartins@bto.org](mailto:housemartins@bto.org) (01842 750050).

### **Should I inform anybody ahead of my visit?**

In most cases, it will not be necessary to inform anybody of your survey visit. However, if you need access to private land or sensitive sites such as schools and hospitals, this should be arranged prior to the survey visit.

You should use your common sense to decide whether or not to inform anybody else ahead of the survey. For example, if you know that there is a local Neighbourhood Watch scheme or a parish magazine that covers the area of your square, there is no harm in contacting them in advance so that local people will be aware that someone will be carrying out survey work in the area. Although this is not essential, it may help to ensure that any contact with residents in the square goes smoothly.

The BTO will be informing the police Wildlife Crime Officers about the survey to make them aware it is going ahead, and asking them to cascade to local police officers if and where they feel it is appropriate.

### **When is the best time to visit?**

House Martins are normally active throughout the day at the nest site and are usually vocal and visible. However, it is advisable to avoid very early morning and late night as adult House Martins may be roosting at these times. As the survey involves looking up at the eaves of houses, it is also worth considering the privacy of residents and avoiding times when many residents will be waking up and going to bed, to reduce the possibility of misunderstandings occurring.

### **Searching for House Martin nests**

Nests on the front of buildings are often clearly visible from the footpath. However, House Martins are normally vocal and are often first found by sound rather than sight. In order to search for House Martins nesting in urban areas, it is therefore normally sufficient to walk at a steady (slow to medium) pace along each road within the area, listening out for House Martins and looking up at the eaves and gable tops ahead of you. There is normally no need to stop and look closely at any buildings or to use binoculars when searching for nests.

### **Viewing nests for signs of occupancy**

When a nest is located, it is not always easy to see birds inside the nest with the naked eye, so it may sometimes be necessary to use binoculars to check if the nest is occupied. If you need to do this, you should respect the privacy of local residents at all times. Please bear in mind that some local residents will not be aware that House Martins are nesting in the area, and will understandably be suspicious about people looking up at houses with binoculars. Where possible, it is advisable to let

homeowners know that you are carrying out a survey of House Martins. If you have any concerns about using binoculars, an alternative is to watch the nest from a suitable distance for a short time to check for birds returning to the nest. The short duration for the survey visits, with visits c.3 weeks apart, is timed to ensure that young will be in most occupied nests during at least one of the visits and that the adult birds will be making regular visits to feed them.

In residential areas, where there are large numbers of private properties, House Martins may be nesting in small groups of one or more nests on many different buildings, each of which will need to be recorded as a separate colony for the purposes of the survey. In this situation, it will not normally be feasible to knock on every house to discuss the survey. You do not necessarily need to knock on every door, and you can stop briefly to watch for signs of occupancy and record the required survey data, before moving on. House Martins will sometimes avoid visiting nests when people are too close to them, so you should observe from a respectable distance where you can see the nest with the naked eye but respect the privacy of the residents.

It is courteous to discuss the survey with any residents that you do see or any people that approach you and answer any questions that they may have. If you see someone watching you it is advisable to say 'hello' and talk to them to let them know what you are doing. It will normally be best to be as open as possible when carrying out the survey visits. If you are worried about people reacting to your presence, and begin acting furtively, this will be more likely to make people suspicious.

### **When should I contact home owners?**

In some situations, you may need to talk to residents before recording the survey data. You should consider whether you feel that you are able to collect the data quickly and efficiently without disturbing the privacy of the residents. You should use your common sense when deciding whether to contact residents, but the following examples are situations where this may be most appropriate:

- If you are unable to see the nests from public roads (*e.g.* if nests are hidden by the overhang of the eaves), you should **always** ask permission before viewing from private land.
- If you suspect that there are several nests on the back of a house, please consider asking the homeowner if you can view or count the nests.
- If there are a large number of nests on a property, you may need to stand and watch for some time to observe how many nests are occupied. In this case it will be courteous to knock and discuss the survey with the homeowner/resident. In most cases, homeowners with a large number of nests will probably be favourable to House Martins and will be happy to discuss the survey.
- If nests are located in an inconvenient place (*e.g.* above windows), and you feel uncomfortable watching them without first speaking to the homeowner/resident.

If you have attempted to contact the homeowner but been unable to do so, it will normally be okay for you to observe the nests for a short time (provided you do so from a public right of way). If you have **any** concerns about watching a nest (*e.g.* if it is above a window), please do not wait around. **Likewise, if you have spoken to a householder and they have expressed concerns about you watching the nests, please respect their wishes.** In such cases the nests should be recorded as complete, but not occupied. The estimate of the number of adult birds in the 1-km square will help us assess the level of occupancy.

### **Talking to members of the public**

Many members of the public who have House Martins nesting on their house are likely to be interested in the survey. Please be courteous at all times and answer their questions if you are able to. We will be producing a hand out that you can give to members of the public, to tell them about House Martins and about the survey. This information leaflet will be available to print from the website; hard copies will also be available from your Regional Representative or from BTO HQ ([housemartins@bto.org](mailto:housemartins@bto.org)).

If you do not know the answer to a question asked by a member of the public, it is best to state that you don't know rather than attempting to answer. Instead, you can suggest that they contact the BTO directly – we will respond to any queries we receive ([www.bto.org](http://www.bto.org); [housemartins@bto.org](mailto:housemartins@bto.org); 01842 750050). These contact details are on the information leaflet, but you may wish to write them in a notebook in case you run out of leaflets.

You may occasionally be approached by members of the public who are concerned about the fact that someone is walking around with binoculars and taking notes in a residential area. If this happens, remain calm and explain to them what you are doing, offering them a copy of the information leaflet. You should also carry with you a copy of the formal letter identifying you as a survey participant, which is available from the website, so you can show this to them if necessary. In the vast majority of squares, we expect that members of the public will be happy with this explanation. Often, once they are aware of what you are doing, they will be interested in the survey and ask more questions about it.

Very occasionally, members of the public may be unwilling to accept that a surveyor has the right to carry out a survey. If an encounter becomes confrontational, and you have concerns for your own safety, cease fieldwork immediately. Keep calm and walk away, rather than attempting to engage in any further discussion. If anyone is threatening, very abusive or causes you undue alarm, consider calling 101 (the police non-emergency number), or 999 in more extreme situations if you feel like the situation may get out of hand or if someone continues to confront you and follows you after you have walked away.

### **Surveying public buildings (schools/hospitals)**

Many public buildings will have public access, or (in the case of schools) will be viewable from the surrounding streets. It will often be possible to carry out the recce survey of these areas by walking around the site using public rights of way to check for the presence of House Martins, listening for calls and looking for nests with the naked eye (without using binoculars). In the case of schools, it is sensible to carry out this visit outside school hours.

If no House Martins are found, the survey visits can be carried out in a similar manner to confirm that House Martins are absent from the site.

However, if House Martins are present at or around the site, or you have been unable to view the site sufficiently from public rights of way, you should contact the school (or building managers) to request permission to carry out the survey and to arrange an appropriate time to do so. Seeking permission will be essential if you need access to school grounds or if you need to use binoculars to view nests. Even if all the nests can be viewed from public rights of way without using binoculars, it is still generally advisable to contact the building managers ahead of the survey, particularly in the case of schools, as parents and teachers will be understandably concerned if they see someone looking at the school and taking notes.