

# HMSnews

The newsletter of the House Martin Survey

Spring 2012



## Thank you...

... to everyone who took part in the 2011 House Martin Survey. As I write this I have just had the joy of seeing my first House Martins of the year. Two birds flying over the BTO's Nunnery Lakes reserve here in Thetford. They will not have had an easy journey from their wintering grounds in sub-Saharan Africa. The weather in southern Europe and parts of North Africa during the last ten days has been appalling at times, with strong winds, hail, heavy rain and cold temperatures dominating. This weather won't last and, once it clears, birds that have been held-up will begin to arrive, albeit a little later than usual. The 2011 results show a mixed breeding season where some colonies were lost and new ones found. House Martins can be fickle and seem to move colonies on a whim. This could be linked to the accessibility of nearby mud, so it is interesting to see more and more artificial nests being used in existing colonies.

**Paul Standliffe**

### NATIONAL RESULTS SUMMARY

Four-hundred and seventy-five people told us about their House Martins, up from the 365 who took part in the survey in 2010. As a result 1,414 nests were recorded (970 in 2010). Three-quarters of you told us that you had martins returning to nests sites that were occupied in 2010.

So, what sort of a breeding season did our House Martins have? The number of active nests was up, at 3.8 per building (3.4 in 2010), and just over a quarter of these (28%) were newly made nests, whilst the rest were in existing or artificial nests. So, there is no evidence of a decline in colony size, or that birds had trouble finding nest building material, both colony size and the proportion of new nests was slightly up in 2011.

The number of houses that lost their House Martins was similar to that from houses that gained them, so there appears to be some re-distribution going on. Thirty-two houses lost them and thirty-five gained them in 2011.

These results suggest that the 2011 breeding season was a slightly better one than that of 2010 - what will the 2012 breeding season bring?

### So, what actually happened in 2011?

The north was the place to be, with 91% of the houses that took part in the survey having breeding House Martins. Once again the south had the lowest proportion, at 79%. This was slightly higher than the 77% of houses that had breeding martins in 2010 though. The proportion in Scotland was 88%, in the Midlands it was 86%, Ireland came in with 85% and Wales with 82%. Despite Ireland having a lower proportion of occupied houses than the Midlands, Scotland and northern England, it had the greatest number of nests per house, at 6.5; up from 4.1 in the same houses in 2010.

The south had 4.8 nests per house, whilst in the north of England there were only 3.5 nests per house. In Wales there were only 3.2 per house and in the Midlands, 2.9. Scotland had the lowest number of nests per house, at 2.5.

All-in-all, the 2011 breeding season didn't break any records for the best but it wasn't the worst either. Whilst many people were concerned that they had lost their martins, others gained them. So, it seems that our House Martins are just about holding their own.

### Regional Variations

Proportion of houses with breeding House Martins

Northern England		Southern England		Midlands		Scotland		Ireland		Wales	
2010	2011	2010	2011	2010	2011	2010	2011	2010	2011	2010	2011
82%	91%	77%	79%	82%	86%	85%	88%	91%	85%	91%	82%



### British Trust for Ornithology

The Nunnery,  
Thetford, Norfolk.  
IP24 2PU

Tel: (01842) 750050

Fax: (01842) 750030

Email: [info@bto.org](mailto:info@bto.org)

Web site: [www.bto.org](http://www.bto.org)

Registered Charity  
No 216652 (England & Wales)  
No SC039193 (Scotland)

# Artificial Nests!

Providing more artificial nests might increase the chances of House Martins using them ...

**Bob Crook - Surrey**

**T**here was a clear increase in artificial nests in 2011 with a total of 350 (224 in 2010) provided. From reports received, just over half of these were used this year. The number of artificial nests provided at sites where at least one was used, at 4.7 (4.6 in 2011), was higher than at sites where they weren't. 2.8 in 2011, 2.0 in 2010.

## When artificial is the key

We moved into our present house about 20 years ago. In the first summer we had House Martins appear and try to make a nest on the north facing back of the house but it kept falling down. This was due to the soil which, being a fenland peat, was useless. So, determined to help them, I put some nails into the wall and built a little ledge of cement. This worked a treat and they had a successful brood. The next year the nail nest was in use with a double brood, and a couple of mud nests were started but either fell down or did not get finished.

The following year, not wanting to cover the house in nails, I purchased six plastic nests and proudly put them up... the sparrows quickly moved in. So I took them down, made the holes smaller with sealant and cut grooves to the inside since the sparrows had difficulty getting out once inside. This worked a treat... no sparrows and three nests of House Martins, one in the repaired nail nest and two in the plastic ones. A spare plastic nest came in handy when a neighbour's nest (a new one for that year and the only one in the neighbourhood) fell down but the babies were rescued, put in it and fledged by the adults.

After about three years we were at the stage where all bar one of the plastic ones were being used, the nail nest was in use and we had at least three double broods. Realising that the following year would see a housing shortage, I went to get some more plastic nests but disaster, the factory had burnt down and there were no alternatives available (bear in mind Google was in its infancy!).



BOB CROOK/LYNN GOULD

So, I decided to make some. I could not get cement to work but had some plastic plant pots handy, so with a bit of glue, plastic and sealant, I had another eight to put up. These actually worked rather well and I still have one which is used to this day, as a memento of how desperate the martins are to nest.

The combination of the plastic nests, the flower pots and the nail nest lasted a few more years but numbers were increasing at an alarming rate, so a search was on for ready-made concrete ones, a couple of designs were now on the market. A couple of each were tested and the key was to purchase ones which had a small opening ... or else the sparrows get in. Once a suitable design was found, doubles were purchased and the flower pots replaced with them. This worked very well and kept the population growing over the years.

This year, 2011, we have had 23 active nests (a mixture of plastic, concrete, one flower pot and the nails nest) with about eight having double broods. Having had nearly all of the north side of the house used up with nests and being rather limited for space on the east side, I put a double up on the west side and late on in the year one of them was used successfully. For 2012 I believe I need to find space for an additional five nests, they seem to increase at the rate of about 25% each year.

I hope my ramblings are of interest and might inspire others to put up artificial nests.

DOUBLE NESTS  
HELP TO KEEP  
THE POPULATION  
GROWING!

▲ Artificial nests can save around two weeks of nest building time.

◀ A plant pot nest - still being used to this day.

## LIVING WITH HOUSE MARTINS...

By David Hobson

West Sussex

Having hundreds of House Martins as lodgers has brought our family enormous pleasure over many years. We look forward eagerly to their arrival in mid-April and we anticipate their departure in early October with sadness. But, there are practical considerations:

- We have not been able to repair or redecorate the house for years because scaffolding would disrupt the flight paths. Fortunately, this year we had the dry spring so we had the scaffold up and the decorating done just as the first martins arrived.
- My wife has always wanted a convertible but we realised a hard top was the only answer. Clean cars are not an option.
- We stopped trying to dry clothes outside years ago.
- The window cleaner goes abroad for the summer as there is no point coming to our house. When we open our sash windows we only open the bottom sashes otherwise trainee martins miss the nest and progress to circular tours of our bedrooms, fluttering a few inches from the ceiling and refusing to come down to the level of the open window or door until they are exhausted. Then we enclose their tired bodies in our hands and take the weightless bird to the window. After a moment of eye contact they are gone, back to their world while we clean ours.
- Eating outside is a pleasure but a lottery. Gifts are deposited from above without malice, sometimes embellishing a salad, sometimes adding body to a glass of wine. We know what to expect and our friends take it as an honour to be favoured in this way.



LYNN GOULD

**House Sparrows have stolen a few nests from the House Martins.**

- This year has seen a surge in new nest building and refurbishment. Whilst the sparrows have stolen a few nests there are still more than eighty active martins nests. We expect each nest to have two broods and a final colony size of several hundred birds.

Our house becomes dynamic when the martins are around and dreary when they are gone.

## House Martin Diary

By Lynn Gould

Ringmer, East Sussex

### April - May

6 April - first House Martins arrive!

Four birds going in and out of the artificial nests on the house. First sighting last year was on 20 April.

7 May - more House Martins arrive.

Around 12-16 birds checking out the nests.

29 May - first hatchlings heard.

More nests in use this year - six out of 11 occupied. They do prefer the double nests, so will change the singles over to doubles next year.

### June

9 June - a new pair of House Martins arrived and began to set up nest. More chicks have hatched.

16 June - First group has fledged today (first two nests), taking short flights in and out of nests and a new nest has been started.

19 June - Two days of heavy rain and strong winds has meant the recent fledglings have remained

secure in their nests relying on parents to continue feeding them.

27 June - Another family fledged last week, one more almost ready to go and, two more nests with young chicks.

29 June - The very first nest to have chicks in this year has got a second brood.

### July - August

14 July - The second broods are doing well, more eggs hatched.

27 July - The very first nest we put up about seven years ago has finally got chicks in it for the very first time.

10 August - The first broods have now gone, both here and at Laughton, much quieter at both with less birds flying around.

14 August - Chicks have hatched in the end nest, really surprised how late on they are still breeding.

17 August - Two more nests have



newly hatched chicks and maybe one more nest still with eggs in.

### September

3 September - The two nests with the older chicks have fledged over the past two days, just three more to go.

13 September - Just two nests left with chicks, which should be ready to fledge within the next week.

23 September - At 6.30 (dusk) a group of eight House Martins came

into the nests, could be the recently fledged juveniles.

26 September - All our House Martins have fledged, still staying close to the nests.

28 September - Saw small group of juveniles check out the nests this morning before moving off. Our last group have now gone, taking advantage of the warm weather.

## HOUSE MARTINS - YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED

**Q: Peter Thatcher (Cambs)** - I am a little puzzled by a happy event. On two houses in my close proximity House Martins have built nests this year. I am delighted, but puzzled, because they have not used these two sites for many years. How have they known where to come back to after such a long absence? And where might they have been in subsequent years?

**A:** It is difficult to say for sure whether or not these are birds returning after a long absence, or new birds that have found a suitable site for nest building. House Martins are notoriously fickle and have been known to abandon colonies only to re-establish them a few years later. One of the main factors that makes a site good for nest building is its proximity to mud, it will be this that makes this site still attractive to the martins.

**Q: Ann Hodnett** - The housing authority that owns our home recently replaced all our windows and doors to bring them up to government regulation. This was done just as the House Martins started to arrive, and despite all my finger crossing, they now refuse to build here. I'm not sure if it is because of the windows (they were wooden frames but are now plastic), or because they remember what has happened in the last two years. (If you remember I wrote to you about a Tawny Owl attacking the nests). Either way it means a great loss for us. I do hope that this is not a recurring problem with these windows as that would mean fewer places for them to nest.

**A:** Plastic fascias, soffits and window frames do appear to present problems for nest building House Martins. We receive quite a few emails telling us about nests falling and birds not nest building at all where new plastic materials have replaced the old wooden ones. One enterprising House Martin surveyor got around this by attaching chicken wire to the fascias where House Martins nested previously, giving the nests something to adhere to.

**Q: Lisa Anderson (London)** - We have a ready-made nest for House Martins, which I am pleased to say, has been used by them for about three years now. However, we went away two weeks ago and a neighbour who was taking care of our garden, said that she had found three dead baby House Martins. Clearly they had fallen from the nest. They were not really small either. This has not happened before. Is there any reason why this would happen? My neighbour, and indeed myself were very upset to see this.

**A:** Without direct observation, it is difficult to say for sure why these young House Martins fell from the nest. They might have died in the nest and were cleared out by the adults, or, they might possibly have been evicted by prospecting House Sparrows. Eviction from the nest by another prospecting pair of House Martins is also a possibility.

**Q: Karen Thomas (Beds)** - I have never really worked out just how many pairs of birds use each nest on our house as there always seems to be more than two visiting for most of the summer, is this normal?

**A:** As the breeding season progresses, it becomes more difficult to determine just how many martins are visiting a nest. When the young get close to fledging, parents from other nests and non-breeding adults often visit nests to entice the young inside to leave. This behaviour can be observed for several days prior to fledging.



JOHN HARDING/DOUG WELCH

### THE PROBLEM WITH SPARROWS

We have received quite a few emails telling us about House Sparrows taking over House Martin nests, both natural and artificial, and asking what can be done to deter the House Sparrows.

House Sparrows tend to take over the nests before the House Martins return from their winter in Africa. It is difficult to know how to deter them from using natural House Martin nests but we have been told of two successful methods with artificial nests.

Taping over the entrance hole of the nest prevents the House Sparrows getting into the nest but this should be removed by 31 March, around the time that the first House Martins arrive back in the UK. Removal of the artificial nests during the winter months and replacing them by 31 March makes them unavailable to the House Sparrows and has the added benefit of making them easier to clean

out before replacing them. The artificial nests shouldn't be taken down until mid-October, this allows for late broods that can still be in the nest during late September.

It is worth remembering that House Sparrows are red-listed as a bird of conservation concern. We have lost over half of our breeding sparrows over the last twenty-five years so, why not put up a nest box for the sparrows? House Sparrows readily take to nest boxes with a 32mm entrance hole. They also like to nest in colonies, so why not put up two or three?

