

Species Action Plan

Sand Martin



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“Indeed [the sand martin] seems so to delight in large waters, that no instance occurs of their abounding, but near vast pools or rivers: and in particular it has been remarked that they swarm in the banks of the Thames, in some places below London-bridge.”
(Gilbert White, 1774)

1. Aims

- To protect and enhance sand martin populations in London, in semi-natural and non-traditional habitats.
- To increase our knowledge of sand martins and their habitat requirements in London.
- To raise public awareness of sand martins and involve Londoners in their conservation.

2. Introduction

The sand martin (*Riparia riparia*), a swallow-like bird with a brown back and white underparts, is a fairly common breeding bird throughout mainland Britain and Ireland. A summer migrant to the UK, sand martins arrive between mid-March to mid-April to breed, before moving south in September to winter in sub-Saharan Africa.

Sand martins are aerial invertebrate feeders, and are often closely associated with areas productive for insects, near to open water. They nest in colonies that may contain 100 or more pairs, excavating horizontal nest chambers in dry, sandy, vertical banks in sand and gravel pits, railway cuttings, riverbanks and exceptionally in drainpipes in walls, holes in brickwork near to reservoirs, canal banks and similar areas of open water. Increasingly, however, sand martins have been found to make use of the sandbanks of both working and redundant mineral extraction pits. They will also utilise specially designed artificial 'nest-boxes' and banks.

Reedbeds are an important pre-migration habitat for sand martins, where large numbers of the birds can often be seen feeding over nearby open water, especially in the early evening.

3. Current Status

The sand martin can be found in a number of locations in London where suitable breeding banks lie in close proximity to open water. 11 colonies were reported in the 1998 London Bird Report, representing a total of some 130-140 breeding holes. Of these colonies, 7 were within the Greater London boundary. The cumulative London Bird Report data can be considered to be a low estimate of the total population, since some sites will inevitably not be visited every year unless specific survey is being carried out.

A comparison of recent records with those from 30 years ago suggests a general decrease in population in the London area. This has been particularly marked in West London, though this has been partially offset by an increase in East London and Essex.

London's sand martin population is currently concentrated in the Lee Valley, Colne Valley, western boroughs of Kingston and Hounslow, and eastern boroughs of Redbridge and Havering. Increasingly, small populations are being discovered using man-made structures in such places as the Royal Docks and along the Lower Lea. A population was recently discovered breeding in the walls of an old balancing pond in the East End.

4. Specific Factors Affecting the Species

4.1 Land use changes

The majority of breeding sand martins are reliant on artificial structures in the London area. However, changes in use of gravel workings, either by in-filling or remodelling, can cause the loss of breeding banks. Similarly, the renewal of flood defences, dock walls

and canal banks often entail destruction of nest holes previously used by sand martins. Some of these deficits are offset by the creation of new gravel workings and colonies may move if favourable circumstances prevail elsewhere.

4.2 Overseas factors

The sand martin population is also affected by circumstances in their wintering grounds. Droughts in the Sahel region of Africa in 1968 and 1985 seriously impacted the UK population. The movement of colonies, or transfer of birds between them can mean that new colonies are overlooked. There is therefore incomplete knowledge of the London population.

5 Current Action

5.1 Legal status

The Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981, as amended) protects sand martins from killing and catching, being held in captivity, and the wilful destruction of their nests.

5.2 Mechanisms targeting the species

These current actions are ongoing. They need to be supported and continued in addition to the new action listed under Section 7.

5.2.1 Artificial nest creation

The Environment Agency places sand martin holes in new flood defences. The London Wildlife Trust, BTCV and the Lower Lea Project have formed a partnership to seek funding for habitat work in the London Boroughs of Tower Hamlets and Newham. A sand martin barrel has been set up at Beddington Sewage Works in Sutton.

5.2.2 Monitoring

Monitoring of sand martin colonies is carried out at a national level through the Waterways Bird Survey (WBS) and Breeding Bird Survey (BBS).

6. Objectives, Actions and Targets

Most of these actions are specific to this species. However, there are other, broader actions that apply generically to a number of habitats and species. These are located in a separate 'Generic Action' section which should be read in conjunction with this document. There are generic actions for Site Management, Habitat Protection, Species Protection, Ecological Monitoring, Biological Records, Communications and Funding.

Please note that the partners identified in the tables are those that have been involved in the process of forming the plan. It is not an exclusive list and new partners are both welcomed and needed. The leads identified are responsible for co-ordinating the actions – but are not necessarily implementers.

Objective 1 Improve data on sand martins in London

Target: Obtain all relevant information about sand martin breeding sites by 2002

Action	Target Date	Lead	Other Partners
Continue regular recording of sand martins in London through Breeding Bird and Waterways Bird Surveys	Ongoing	LNHS	BTO, BBS, WBS, LNHS counters
Collate existing information on known breeding sites	2001	LWT	EBS, ELBS
Coordinate targeted breeding sand martin survey, particularly on canals and Thames	2003	LNHS	BTO, EBS, ELBS

Objective 2 Ensure protection/enhancement of sand martin colonies and nest-sites affected by new developments.

Target: Provide best practice advice by 2003

Action	Target Date	Lead	Other Partners
Disseminate London sand martin distribution data to relevant land owners and managers of existing sites	2002	LWT	LNHS
Produce and disseminate a best practice advice note	2003	EA	RSPB, WWT

Objective 3 Increase the number of potential sand martin breeding sites

Target: Create 15 sand martin banks in London by 2005

Action	Target Date	Lead	Other Partners
Using survey and research information, identify sites suitable for artificial nest creation within London's waterways network, including flood defences	2002	RSPB	WWT, EA TEP, BW, GLA
Create 2 demonstration sites, 1 in West London at Barn Elms, 1 in East London	2003	TEP	WWT, EA
Create 3 artificial breeding sites a year for 5 years	2005	RSPB	WWT, LWT, LA, BW, EA, TW
Ensure regular monitoring of these sites to assess their success	2005	RSPB	WWT, LWT, LNHS, GLA

Objective 4 Raise public awareness of sand martins and their place in London's environment

Target: Cultural links with sand martins identified by 2003

Action	Target	Lead	Other Partners
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	Date		
Investigate and promote cultural links between sand martins and Londoners	2004	RSPB	BTO, BTCV, LWT

Relevant Action Plans

London Plans

Tidal Thames; Canals, Grazing Marsh; Floodplain Grassland; Marshland; Reedbed; Ponds, Lakes and Reservoirs; Railway Linesides; Farmland.

National Plans

Coastal & Floodplain Grazing Marsh; Reedbeds; Eutrophic Standing Waters

Key References

White, G. (1901). *The Natural History of Selborne*. Penguin Books.

Dennis, M. (2000). *New Atlas of Breeding Birds of the London Area*. Unpublished.

Abbreviations

BBS - Breeding Bird Survey
BTO - British Trust for Ornithology
BW - British Waterways
EA - Environment Agency
EBS - Essex Birdwatching Society
ELBF - East London Birders' Forum
GLA - Greater London Authority

LA - Local Authorities
LNHS - London Natural History Society
LWT - London Wildlife Trust
RSPB - Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
TEP - Thames Estuary Partnership
TW – Thames Water
WBS - Waterways Bird Survey
WWT - Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust

Contact

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