

## Species Action Plan

# Sand Martin

*“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.
- 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. Summer migrants 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. 10 colonies were reported in the

1999 London Bird Report, representing a total of some 188 breeding holes. 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 built 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 rely 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**

Under the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981, as amended) it is an offence to intentionally kill, injure or take sand martins or to intentionally take, damage or destroy the eggs or nest of a sand martin whilst it is in use or being built.

### **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 large sand martin bank with 344 holes has been constructed at Beddington Sewage Works in Sutton, in addition to a sand martin barrel. A further Sand Martin/Kingfisher bank has been installed in Deptford Creek in 2003. Additional examples in London of sand martin nest site creation are emerging and expertise is developing.

### 5.2.2 Monitoring

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

## 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: Maintain an up to date database on sand martin breeding sites in London**

Action	Target Date	Lead	Other Partners
1.1 Collate existing information on known breeding sites	Achieved 2001	LWT	EBS, ELBS
1.2 Map information collated on existing sand martin breeding sites onto GIS	2006	GIGL	RSPB
1.3 Continue regular recording of sand martins in London through BTO Breeding Bird and Waterways Bird Surveys	Annually	LNHS	BTO, BBS, WBS, LNHS counters
1.4 Maintain database on known breeding sites	Annually	LWT	EBS, ELBF
1.5 Co-ordinate targeted breeding sand martin survey, particularly on canals and Thames	2007	LNHS	BTO, EBS, ELBF

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

**Target: Produce, disseminate and keep updated best practice advice**

Action	Target Date	Lead	Other Partners
2.1 Produce and disseminate best practice advice note on the creation of artificial banks	Achieved	EA	RSPB, WWT
2.2 Disseminate London sand martin distribution data to relevant land owners and managers of existing sites	2004	LWT	LNHS
2.3 Revise, as necessary, best practice advice note on the creation of artificial banks	2005	EA/LWT	RSPB, WWT

**Objective 3 Increase the number of potential sand martin breeding sites**

**Target: Create 15 sand martin banks in London by 2006**

Action	Target Date	Lead	Other Partners
3.1 Create two demonstration sites in West London at WWT London Wetland Centre, Barn Elms, and 1 in East London	Achieved	TEP	WWT, EA
3.2 Using survey and research information, identify sites suitable for artificial nest creation within London's waterways network, including flood defences	2004	RSPB	WWT, EA, TEP, BW, GLA
3.3 Create 3 artificial breeding sites a year for 5 years	2006	RSPB	WWT, LWT, LA, BW, EA, TW
3.4 Ensure regular monitoring of these sites to assess their success	2006	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 2004**

Action	Target Date	Lead	Other Partners
4.1 Investigate and promote community involvement in sand martin conservation	2004	RSPB	BTO, BTCV, LWT

**Relevant Action Plans**

## **London Plans**

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

## **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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