

## Sand Martins. A nest box.

Garth Lowe



01. A nest box for Sand Martins built at Diglis, Worcester. Garth Lowe

Sand Martins are one of the first of the summer migrants to arrive back in Britain from the Sahel region of Africa. They also occur in a large part of Europe where the right geology provides suitable banks for them to tunnel into and make a nest chamber at the end. Suitable river banks exposed between floods are their normal nest sites. -They will also use open pipes in brick structures by rivers and artificial banks where the quarrying of sand takes place but use of these areas is often short lived

Their nesting regime makes them hard to monitor but in 1968-1969 and in 1983-1984 the population noticeably crashed probably because a severe drought in the Sahel killed wintering birds. The low numbers took them into the amber threat zone during 2000 to 2010 in UK. Since then numbers have slowly risen and they have moved back into the green category. It has also been noted that the numbers are affected by bad weather when less broods are completed. - It is estimated there are now 250,000 nesting pairs in the UK.

For many years these birds have been seen on the River Severn in the Diglis area of Worcester. This year (2022) an estimate of 15 pairs managed to nest in a basin just above the locks probably occupying all available holes.

Early in 2022 a small group of local RSPB members discussed the possibility of constructing an artificial nest site above flood levels where nesting attempts could be monitored. Similar schemes have been used in other parts of the country so information on construction was readily available. Following this, a structure with nest holes was built on top of the wall upstream of Diglis Lock in time for the returning martins. It was basically a large box on legs containing 30 individual identical nesting chambers with a tunnel from each to an opening on the front board, prepared to look like a sandy river bank. The tunnels had a small amount of sand added so the nest building excavation was as near normal as possible. Access for monitoring was via a removable small door on each nesting chamber and the whole back area was covered with insulation and finally has a large board screwed over the whole back. All this can easily be removed at intervals to monitor progress. It is planned to remove the structure at the end of the breeding season as flooding occurs over this part of the island. This also makes it easy to fumigate the nesting chambers.

Throughout the summer regular monitoring visits were made to check on progress, and if suitably sized chicks were found the BTO registered bird ringers fitted them with uniquely numbered rings.

A big surprise came some weeks after one brood was ringed on 14<sup>th</sup> June and later fledged. 26 days later one of these chicks was re-caught by another ringer on Lands End on 10<sup>th</sup> July. This bird was apparently already making its long migration south and had already covered 338km of its long journey south.

Just seven pairs actually nested successfully and fledged young. These were probably the surplus birds from the nearby natural site. Another three pairs attempted to nest but failed to rear any chicks. The birds used peripheral holes in the great nest box possibly because they could easily recognise the position of their own tunnel. Eleven holes were actually used and 43 chicks were ringed. Three pairs had a second brood and another may have moved to another hole but the eggs never hatched while the hot spell prevailed. More pairs might take up holes across the front next year if they are able to use a feature or icon to identify the entrance. A small number of nests failed and some chicks possibly died from lack of food in what was an unusually hot and dry summer. Next year it will be interesting to see if fewer birds use the great box and return to the nearby traditional site.

Elsewhere in Britain similar structures have been erected with varying results. At a northern RSPB wetland reserve none of the holes were used in a similar construction even though numerous Sand Martins were observed flying over the water. It may be these were migrating birds just feeding up.

It is good to report on a successful project that enhances the prospects for one of our local birds.

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