

Welcoming back the Sand Martins

Bridget Flanagan looks forward to our first spring arrivals

Before Easter, and normally before we change the clocks in March, the Sand Martins will be back in England. These little birds, 12-14 cm long and weighing about 11-20 g, are the smallest members of the swallow family (*Hirundines*). They arrive after travelling from the Sahel region of Africa – a semi-arid region south of the Sahara. They come to the UK for the summer and usually raise two broods before leaving in September. Flying insects – predominantly gnats – are their staple diet so they choose river and lake locations where these are plentiful.

Along the River Great Ouse and its many areas of lakes, Sand Martins are a common sight – once you know how to distinguish them. Unlike their cousins, the Swallows and House Martins, who are both a glossy blue-black on their upper body, Sand Martins have brown plumage above, white below, with a distinctive brown band across the breast. They are very gregarious birds, always nesting in colonies. And, when in flight, they take up an almost continuous twittering to each other.



Sand Martin leaving its nest burrow *Photograph by Nigel Sprowell*

The natural nesting site for Sand Martins is a dry sandy river-bank or side of a gravel pit. Here they will excavate horizontal tunnels up to nearly a metre long with a chamber at the end to turn round. There can be groups of up to 100 pairs in a colony – so lots of activity and lots of noise! However, if the ideal site isn't available, the birds manage to adapt their habits and avail of opportunities. Nature is impressively resourceful. The

drainage pipes and gaps in the masonry in the walls of The Quay and the New Bridges causeway at St Ives, and the churchyard wall at Hemingford Grey, have made ideal substitutes for sandy burrows. Here there are well-established colonies that return year after year. At the Godmanchester Nature Reserve humans have intervened to provide more accommodation and help the species thrive. A Sand Martin 'hotel' was built two years ago. Blending naturally with the landscape it offers architecturally designed tunnels for 40 pairs. 'Michelin-starred' gnats buzz over all the lakes. This deluxe residence now enjoys a tranquil setting since the A14 was re-routed. Hopefully the 'twitter publicity' was successful! Everything is ready for the 2022 season and we are looking forward to welcoming the first guests to check-in. Do let us know of your first sightings on our Facebook page.

The Great Ouse Valley Trust promotes for public benefit the conservation, restoration and enjoyment of the landscape, wildlife and heritage of the Great Ouse Valley and environs in the county of Cambridgeshire.

For more information about the Trust please visit
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