SAND MARTIN

The Sand Martin is a moderately common but declining summer visitor and common passage migrant.

Having spent the winter in west Africa, Sand Martins are among the earliest heralds of spring, regularly appearing in the first week of March, although local breeders are not usually on territory until early April. Sand Martin colonies are known to be mobile and frequently relocate to new locations as suitable sites are destroyed or created. They breed in riverbanks and in some sandy sea-cliffs but in Hampshire are almost wholly confined to sand and gravel pits, sometimes in still-working sites; in recent years increasing numbers have successfully used artificial colonies.

Severe population crashes occurred in 1969, 1984 and 1991, most likely because of drought in the West African wintering grounds of the species. The crashes were followed by rapid rebounds, but the population suffered a further and longer decline through the late 1990s until 2003 when it began to grow again. Overall, despite the fluctuations, numbers have held up at national level, but recent data indicates that while northern and Irish populations have grown, numbers in south-east England have declined.

In spring 2021, active Sand Martin colonies were found at four sites across Hampshire. Two colonies nested in artificial nest faces (HIWWT Blashford Lakes and HIWWT Testwood Lakes), one in a sand extraction site (Frithend Pit) and the remainder nested in coastal cliff faces (Barton-on-Sea to Milford-on-Sea). Several previously occupied sites were found to be inactive. A total of 318 active holes were recorded.

The results from the 2021 survey have caused concern about the population of Sand Martins in Hampshire. The Sand Martin survey will be repeated again in 2022 and extended to increase coverage of new potential habitats. HOS is liaising closely with Hampshire County Council and site owners to secure access to known and potential nest sites. This will hopefully enable to determine whether the decline in the Hampshire population represents a real decline, or whether it may be part of a natural population fluctuation, or whether colonies may have relocated to previously unsurveyed locations.