THE MYSTERIOUS HOUSE MARTIN

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House Martins *Delichon urbica*, amongst our common summer visitors in Europe, are universally well-known due to their custom of building their mud nests under the eaves of our houses.

Some people don't like them because of the mess they make, but most householders lucky enough to host one or more breeding pairs look forward to their arrival in April and May as a sign that our spring is in the air, and are sad at their departure in September and October as it means that our winter will soon be upon us.

However, although common and widespread throughout Europe, and in spite of the fact that they are normally closely associated with humans, there are three aspects of their lives that have baffled the experts over the ages:

- Where do they roost at night in the summer months when not in their nests?
- Where in Africa, south of the Sahara Desert, do they spend the winter?
- Where do they roost when in their winter quarters, or when they are on the way there in the autumn and back again in the spring?

On arrival in the spring they usually select an existing nest, repairing it if necessary, and will roost in it at night; it saves them the bother of building a new one from scratch. As the Reverend Gilbert White wrote in his *Natural History of Selborne* in 1773: "Those which breed in a ready finished house get the start in hatching of those that build new, by ten days or a fortnight."

When constructing a new nest, as soon as they have a ledge that is wide enough, they will roost on it. But where do they roost before the construction reaches that stage? First-brood juveniles, after fledging, usually return to their nest for several nights before they are finally kicked out by their parents, who are keen to get on with a second clutch. But where do these juveniles roost after that?

Gilbert White had a go at finding out: "As my principal object was to discover the place of their roosting, I took care to wait on them before they retired to rest and was much pleased to find that, for several evenings together, just at a quarter past five, [this was in October] they all scudded away in great haste towards the south east, and darted down among the low shrubs above the cottages at the end of the hill." He never managed to actually see them "bedding" down for the night, but believed that "with proper assistants I should have settled the matter beyond doubt."

And here we are, well over 200 years later, and the matter has still not been settled!

Several projects, particularly in Germany, have been undertaken to try to settle the matter, but so far with no definite success. There were two schools of thought after the German investigations: one believed that the birds came down to roost in trees in small groups, but well after dusk, when no-one could see them, and the other that the birds stayed high up in the sky, sleeping on the wing, as do swifts. But nothing yet has been definitely proved, one way or the other.

The movement of birds is one of several aspects of their lives that can be determined by ringing. British ringers have done their best, in regard to House Martins, by ringing over 250 000 of them to-date, but only one has ever been recovered south of the Sahara and that was in Nigeria. Does this slender evidence mean that our British birds winter in that area? Or was this particular bird on its way further south? One House Martin, ringed as a juvenile in Norway in 1974, was killed by a cat in Cape Town in February 1980, having travelled over 6 000 miles there and back five times; so our bird also may have been aiming for South Africa.

European Swallows *Hirundo rustica* and European Sand Martins *Riparia riparia* come down to roost in the evenings in reedbeds or low bushes in immense numbers while on migration and down in their African winter quarters. They come down in their thousands or even millions, and are easy to catch at these communal roosts. During our winter, many thousands of European Swallows are caught and ringed annually in southern Africa, and over the past four or five winters some 40 000 Sand Martins have been caught in West Africa in Senegal. Ringing recoveries from these projects have indicated that our British Sand Martins winter in or around Senegal, and our European Swallows winter in or around the Natal area of South Africa.

However, very few House Martins are caught and ringed south of the Sahara. Why can't those ringers down there catch more? Is it because the birds only come down to roost in small parties after dusk when no-one can see them? Or is it because they never come down to *terra firma* at all?

There have been quite a few publications on the subject over the last 40 years or so, and these make interesting reading. Here are a few snippets taken from some of them:

1952. R Verheyen in *Le Gerfaut* remarked that the "Hirondelle de fenêtre" had "une vie trés mystérieuse en Afrique."

1963. Kai Curry-Linahl in *The Ostrich* wrote: "It has long been considered something of a mystery where House Martins roost during their spring and autumn migration, and even where in Africa they have their winter quarters."

1972. R E Moreau in his book *The Palaearctic — African Bird Migration Systems* reckoned that every spring some 90 million House Martins cross the Sahara into central and southern Africa, and was puzzled that so few are then observed down there. "The extremely small numbers seen in Africa during the winter must be delusive", he wrote.

1974. J & L Harper requested information in *The East Africa Natural History Society Bulletin*: "We do not know if House Martins roost terrestrially or on the wing and, if terrestrially, we know of no roost sites. From this and from the fact that the birds rarely come close to the ground, only 48 have been caught and ringed in East Africa ... We should be very grateful to hear of any roosts so that we could ring House Martins, as their recovery potential must be good, having such a close relationship with man in their breeding quarters."

1988. The mammoth compilation *Birds of the Western Palaearctic*, initiated by S Cramp, devotes 14 pages to House Martins, the information having been collected from a host of publications. It includes the following comments:

- "Aerial roosting not proven but thought to occur during the breeding season."
- "Some debate as to which roost sites are most prevalent on migration and in the winter quarters."
- "In Africa are never seen to roost in reed beds and are believed to roost on the wing."

So there you are! Which do you favour – terrestrial or aerial roosting? Let's hope that readers of this article, whether at home in the summer or on that winter holiday safari in Africa, will keep their eyes open for any House Martin behaviour that could help in shedding some light on the mysteries. By publicising their findings they will perhaps be able to lay claim to a place of immortality in the annals of ornithology!