

= Common house martin =

The common house martin ( *Delichon urbicum* ) , sometimes called the northern house martin or , particularly in Europe , just house martin , is a migratory passerine bird of the swallow family which breeds in Europe , north Africa and temperate Asia ; and winters in sub @-@ Saharan Africa and tropical Asia . It feeds on insects which are caught in flight , and it migrates to climates where flying insects are plentiful . It has a blue head and upperparts , white rump and pure white underparts , and is found in both open country and near human habitation . It is similar in appearance to the two other martin species of the genus *Delichon* , which are both endemic to eastern and southern Asia . It has two accepted subspecies .

Both the scientific and colloquial name of the bird are related to its use of human @-@ made structures . It builds a closed cup nest from mud pellets under eaves or similar locations on buildings usually in colonies .

It is hunted by the Eurasian hobby ( *Falco subbuteo* ) , and like other birds is affected by internal parasites and external fleas and mites , although its large range and population mean that it is not threatened globally .

= = Taxonomy = =

The common house martin was first described by Linnaeus in his *Systema Naturae* in 1758 as *Hirundo urbana* , but was placed in its current genus , *Delichon* , by Thomas Horsfield and Frederic Moore in 1854 . *Delichon* is an anagram of the Ancient Greek term ???????? ( *chel?d?n* ) , meaning " swallow " , and the species name *urbicum* ( *urbica* until 2004 , due to a misunderstanding of Latin grammar ) means " of the town " in Latin .

The genus *Delichon* is a recent divergence from the barn swallow genus *Hirundo* , and its three members are similar in appearance with blue upperparts , a contrasting white @-@ rump , and whitish underparts . In the past , the common house martin was sometimes considered to be conspecific with the Asian house martin ( *D. dasypus* ) , which breeds in the mountains of central and eastern Asia and winters in Southeast Asia , and it also closely resembles the Nepal house martin ( *D. nipalense* ) , a resident in the mountains of southern Asia . Although the three *Delichon* martins are similar in appearance , only *D. urbicum* has a pure white rump and underparts .

The common house martin has two geographical subspecies , the western nominate subspecies *D. u. urbicum* , and the eastern *D. u. lagopodum* , which was described by German zoologist Peter Simon Pallas in 1811 . Other races , like *meridionalis* from around the Mediterranean have been described , but the claimed differences from the nominate race are clinal , and therefore probably invalid .

= = Description = =

The adult common house martin of the western nominate race is 13 centimetres ( 5 @.@ 1 in ) long , with a wing span of 26 ? 29 centimetres ( 10 @.@ 2 ? 11 @.@ 4 in ) and a weight averaging 18 @.@ 3 grammes ( 0 @.@ 65 oz ) . It is steel @-@ blue above with a white rump , and white underparts , including the underwings ; even its short legs have white downy feathering . It has brown eyes and a small black bill , and its toes and exposed parts of the legs are pink . The sexes are similar , but the juvenile bird is sooty black , and some of its wing coverts and quills have white tips and edgings . *D. u. lagopodum* differs from the nominate race in that its white rump extends much further onto the tail , and the fork of its tail is intermediate in depth between that of *D. u. urbicum* and that of the Asian house martin .

The white rump and underparts of the common house martin , very noticeable in flight , prevent confusion with other widespread Palaeoarctic swallows such as the barn swallow ( *Hirundo rustica* ) , sand martin ( *Riparia riparia* ) or red @-@ rumped swallow ( *Cecropis daurica* ) . In Africa , confusion with grey @-@ rumped swallow ( *Pseudhirundo griseopyga* ) is possible , but that species has a grey rump , off @-@ white underparts and long , deeply forked tail . The common house

martin flies with a wing beat averaging 5 @. @ 3 beats per second , which is faster than the wing beat of 4 @. @ 4 beats per second for the barn swallow , but the flight speed of 11 m · s<sup>-1</sup> ( 36 ft · s<sup>-1</sup> ) is typical for hirundines .

The common house martin is a noisy species , especially at its breeding colonies . The male 's song , given throughout the year , is a soft twitter of melodious chirps . The contact call , also given on the wintering grounds , is a hard chirrrp , and the alarm is a shrill tseep .

= = Distribution and habitat = =

The subspecies *D. u. urbicum* breeds across temperate Eurasia east to central Mongolia and the Yenisei River , and in Morocco , Tunisia and northern Algeria , and migrates on a broad front to winter in sub @-@ Saharan Africa . *D. u. lagopodum* breeds eastwards of the Yenisei to Kolyma and south to northern Mongolia and northern China ; it winters in southern China and Southeast Asia .

The preferred habitat of the common house martin is open country with low vegetation , such as pasture , meadows and farmland , and preferably near water , although it is also found in mountains up to at least 2 @, @ 200 metres ( 7 @, @ 200 ft ) altitude . It is much more urban than the barn swallow , and will nest even in city centres if the air is clean enough . It is more likely to be found near trees than other Eurasian swallows , since they provide insect food and also roosting sites . This species does not normally use the reed @-@ bed roosts favoured by migrating barn swallows .

It uses similar open habitats on the wintering grounds , but the common house martin is less conspicuous than wintering barn swallows , tending to fly higher and be more nomadic . In the tropical parts of its wintering range , like East Africa and Thailand , it appears to be mainly found in the higher areas .

The common house martin is a migrant which moves on a broad @-@ front ( i.e. European birds are not funnelled through the short sea crossings used by large soaring birds , but cross the Mediterranean and Sahara ) . While migrating they feed in the air on insects , and they usually travel in daylight . Migration brings its own hazards ; in 1974 , several hundred thousand birds of this species were found dead or dying in the Swiss Alps and surrounding areas , caught by heavy snowfall and low temperatures . Adult survival on autumn migration depends mainly on temperature , with precipitation another major factor , but for juveniles low temperatures during the breeding season are more critical . It is anticipated that since extreme weather is predicted to become more frequent with climate change , future survival rates will depend more on adverse weather conditions than at present .

The common house martin returns to the breeding grounds a few days after the first barn swallows ; like that species , particularly when the weather is poor , it seldom goes straight to the nesting sites , but hunts for food over large fresh water bodies . There are records of migrant house martins staying to breed in Namibia and South Africa instead of returning north . As would be expected for a long distance migrant , it has occurred as a vagrant eastwards to Alaska and west to Newfoundland , Bermuda and the Azores .

= = Behaviour = =

= = = Breeding = = =

The common house martin was originally a cliff and cave nester , and some cliff @-@ nesting colonies still exist , with the nests built below an overhanging rock . It now largely uses human structures such as bridges and houses . Unlike the barn swallow , it uses the outside of inhabited buildings , rather than the inside of barns or stables . The nests are built at the junction of a vertical surface and an overhang , such as on house eaves , so that they may be strengthened by attachment to both planes .

Breeding birds return to Europe between April and May , and nest building starts between late March in North Africa and mid @-@ June in Lapland . The nest is a neat closed convex cup fixed below a suitable ledge , with a narrow opening at the top . It is constructed by both sexes with mud pellets collected in their beaks , and lined with grasses , hair or other soft materials . The mud , added in successive layers , is collected from ponds , streams or puddles . House sparrows frequently attempt to take over the nest during construction , with the house martins rebuilding elsewhere if they are successful . The entrance at the top of the cup is so small once it is complete that sparrows cannot take over the nest .

The common house martin tends to breed colonially , and nests may be built in contact with each other . A colony size of less than 10 nests is typical , but there are records of colonies with thousands of nests . Four or five white eggs are usually laid , which average 1 @. @ 9 x 1 @. @ 33 centimetres ( 0 @. @ 75 x 0 @. @ 52 in ) in size , and weigh 1 @. @ 7 grammes ( 0 @. @ 06 oz ) . The female does most of the incubation , which normally lasts 14 ? 16 days . The newly hatched chicks are altricial , and after a further 22 ? 32 days , depending on weather , the chicks leave the nest . The fledged young stay with , and are fed by , the parents for about a week after leaving the nest . Occasionally , first @-@ year birds from the first brood will assist in feeding the second brood .

There are normally two broods each year , the nest being reused for the second brood , and repaired and used again in subsequent years . Hatching success is 90 % , and fledging survival 60 ? 80 % . Third broods are not uncommon , though late nestlings are often left to starve . The average annual mortality for adults nesting in the Western Palaearctic is 40 ? 60 % , with most deaths outside the breeding season . A study of British breeders gave an average adult survival rate of just under 40 % , but ranging from 25 % to 70 % . Rainfall in the African wintering grounds is a major factor in adult survival , although wet weather in the breeding areas has very little effect . Although individuals aged 10 and 14 years have been recorded , most survive less than five years . For weeks after leaving the nest the young congregate in ever @-@ increasing flocks which , as the season advances , may be seen gathering in trees or on housetops , or on the wires with swallows . By the end of October , most martins have left their breeding areas in western and central Europe , though late birds in November and December are not uncommon , and further south migration finishes later anyway .

Once established , pairs remain together to breed for life ; however , extra @-@ pair copulations are common , making this species genetically polygamous , despite being socially monogamous . A Scottish study showed that 15 % of nestlings were not related to their putative fathers , and 32 % of broods contained at least one extra @-@ pair chick . Extra @-@ pair males , usually from nests where laying had already taken place , were often seen to enter other nests . The paired male initially ensured that his female spent little time alone at the nest , and accompanied her on flights , but the mate @-@ guarding slackened after egg laying began , so the youngest nestling was the most likely to have a different father .

The common house martin has been regularly recorded as hybridising with the barn swallow , this being one of the most common passerine interspecific crosses . The frequency of this hybrid has led to suggestions that *Delichon* is not sufficiently separated genetically from *Hirundo* to be considered a separate genus .

== = Diet == =

The common house martin is similar in habits to other aerial insectivores , including other swallows and martins and the unrelated swifts , and catches insects in flight . In the breeding areas , flies and aphids make up much of the diet , and in Europe , the house martin takes a larger proportion of aphids and small flies than the barn swallow . As with that species , hymenopterans , especially flying ants , are important food items in the wintering area .

This species hunts at an average height of 21 metres ( 70 ft ) during the breeding season , but lower in wet conditions . The hunting grounds are typically within 450 metres ( 1 @, @ 500 ft ) of the nest , with a preference for open ground or water , the latter especially in poor weather , but the

martins will also follow the plough or large animals to catch disturbed insects . On the wintering grounds , hunting takes place at a greater height of over 50 metres ( 165 ft ) .

= = = Predators and parasites = = =

Although the common house martin is hunted by the hobby ( *Falco subbuteo* ) , its aerial skills enable it to evade most predators .

It is parasitised externally by fleas and mites , including the " house martin flea " , *Ceratophyllus hirundinis* , and internally by endoparasites such as *Haemoproteus prognei* ( avian malaria ) , which are transmitted by blood @-@ sucking insects including mosquitoes . A Polish study showed that nests typically contained more than 29 specimens of ectoparasite , with *C. hirundinis* and *Oeciacus hirundinis* the most abundant .

= = Conservation status = =

The common house martin has a large range , with an estimated global extent of 10 million square kilometres . Its European population is estimated to be 20 ? 48 million individuals . Global population trends have not been quantified , although there is evidence of population fluctuations . For these reasons , the species is evaluated as Least Concern on the IUCN Red List , and has no special status under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora ( CITES ) which regulates international trade in specimens of wild animals and plants . In Europe and Britain however , population numbers indicate a declining trend , and leading conservation groups in Britain have updated the conservations status to amber indicating medium conservation concern there .

This is a species which has greatly benefited historically from forest clearance creating the open habitats it prefers , and from human habitation which has given it an abundance of safe nest sites . However , populations can fluctuate locally for a number of reasons . New housing has created more nest sites , and clean @-@ air legislation has enabled breeding in the centre of major cities like London . The population of house martins in Sheffield , central UK , has been estimated at 12 @, @ 353 individuals . Conversely , poor weather , poisoning by agricultural pesticides , lack of mud for nest building and competition with house sparrows can reduce numbers . Widespread declines in common house martin numbers have been reported from central and northern Europe since 1970 . As an attractive bird which feeds on flying insects , the house martin has usually been tolerated by humans when it shares their buildings for nesting , although the accumulation of droppings below breeding birds can be a nuisance leading to some destruction of nests .

= = In literature and culture = =

This species lacks the wealth of literary references associated with its relative , the barn swallow , although it is possible that some of the older mentions for that bird might equally well refer to the house martin . William Shakespeare was clearly describing the house martin when Banquo brings the nests and birds to the attention of Duncan at Macbeth 's castle , Inverness :

" This guest of summer ,  
The temple @-@ haunting martlet , does approve  
By his loved mansionry that the heaven 's breath  
Smells wooingly here . No jutting , frieze ,  
Buttress , nor coign of vantage , but this bird  
Hath made his pendant bed and procreant cradle ;  
Where they most breed and haunt , I have observed  
The air is delicate . " ( *Macbeth* , Act I , scene VI ) .

There are old legends , with no basis in fact , that house martins would wall @-@ up house sparrows by closing the entrance of the mud nest with the intruder inside , or that they would gather en masse to kill a sparrow .

The martlet , often believed to refer to the house martin , or possibly a swallow , was a heraldic bird with short tufts of feathers in the place of legs . It was the cadency mark of the fourth son of a noble family , and features in many coats of arms , including the Plantagenets . The lack of feet signified its inability to land , which explained its link to a younger son , also landless . It also represented swiftness .