

Migrant Sand Martins Riparia riparia at Colony

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The summer of 1996 was an extremely successful one for Sand Martins Riparia riparia in Howe of Fife. I ringed a colony of some 200 pairs throughout the period and became used to seeing what 300-400 birds, flying around it, looked like.

The colony faced North and had uninterrupted views for at least half a mile, before the first trees were encountered. On 14th August, I detected an increase in numbers at the cliff face, with 600-700 birds present. On 15th August in 'high' pressure, a huge influx took place, with parties of birds constantly calling in the sky to the North, then sweeping in to breeding site and adjacent pond. I estimated that 5000 Sand Martins were in the vicinity!

By 16th August, a reduction had taken place, with c.1000 present, mostly around the cliff face. I netted on the 17th and caught 80 birds in ten minutes, all juveniles and only one wearing a shiny non-colony ring. The net was taken down so as not to be overwhelmed by birds. On 18th August the site was remarkable, with the entire bank covered with juveniles, fluttering at the holes. They looked as if they were pouring off the top, completely obscuring the face. Later, when settled on gravel, so dense were they in number that the ground could not be seen. By 19th, I 'guesstimated' that between 5-7,000 were present, insect-like, from ground level to dots in the sky. On 20th, numbers had returned to normal with about 400 around colony.

A remarkable passage, within a few days, with numbers one would expect at a major roost. The manager of the pit told me that he had witnessed similar hordes of Sand Martins at a North Fife workings within the same period.