

Increasing populations of protected species

Sand martins at the London Wetland Centre

Introduction

Sand martins (*Riparia riparia*) are small birds protected under the Berne Convention. They breed in burrows dug into river banks (as shown in the picture) and in old mineral extraction sites such as sand pits. Their burrows measure up to 1 m long, but can be threatened by flooding and predators. They feed by catching insects while in flight, in a similar manner to swallows and swifts. They migrate to Africa for winter.



Sand martin river bank.

Background

In the UK sand martins have suffered from a loss of suitable breeding sites. Their river bank nesting sites can be destroyed by flooding (especially flash floods), bank engineering and dredging. Sand extraction sites can be threatened by renewed extraction activity but also by scrub encroachment during abandonment or landforming during restoration.

Sand martins are named in four Local Biodiversity Action Plans – Fife, Falkirk, Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland, and Waltham Forest, as well as the London regional plan. Many extractive sites have made provision for them as part of restoration or ongoing operations. Examples can be found at Molesey in Surrey, the River Lea, and Bedfont Lakes Country Park in Middlesex (all within the Greater London area); Watermead Country Park and Rutland Water nature reserve in Leicestershire; and Murton Nature Reserve, near Forfar. Here the focus is on the London Wetland Centre in Barnes, London.

Materials and Methods

Site

The London Wetland Centre is a 42 ha Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) owned by the Wildfowl & Wetlands Trust (WWT). Created on a former waterworks site, it consists of various wetland habitats, focusing largely on waterfowl but also home to water voles and aquatic invertebrates.

Results

Work is being carried out to create new areas of wet grassland and expertly manage existing ones to encourage greater populations of these small birds. In order to establish the right habitat for breeding birds it is necessary to: create specific types of vegetation on the grassland; manipulate the water levels so the birds can build their nests on the ground without being flooded out; and install effective measures against predators to protect them until they can fly.

This has involved dredging of scrapes, experimental changes in grazing management and control of predators over five hectares of newly created wetland to improve suitability for breeding.

An increased number of sand martins have been sighted at the wetlands in the wader scrape areas.

Future plans

The WWT will continue to produce monthly reserve reports that give an overview of the wildlife that has been seen at the wetland centre.

Reference

Wetlands and Wildlife Trust (WWT) (2010). London Wetland Centre.
<http://www.wwt.org.uk/>