

XXVII. *Account of the House-martin, or Martlet. In a Letter from the Rev. Gilbert White to the Hon. Daines Barrington.*

DEAR SIR,

Redde, Feb. 10, 1774. **I**N obedience to your injunctions, I sit down to give you some account of the HOUSE-MARTIN, OR MARTLET: and if my monography, of this little domestic and familiar bird, should happen to meet with your approbation, I may probably soon extend my enquiries to the rest of the British *hirundines*, the swallow, the swift, and the bank-martin.

A few house-martins begin to appear about the 16th of April; usually some few days later than the swallow. For some time after they appear, the *hirundines* in general pay no attention to the business of nidification; but play and sport about, either to recruit from the fatigue of their journey, if they do migrate at all; or else, that their blood may recover its true tone and texture, after it has been so long benumbed by the severities of winter. About the middle of May, if the weather be fine, the martin begins to think, in earnest, of providing a mansion for its family. The crust, or shell of this nest, seems to be formed of such dirt, as comes most readily to hand, and is tempered and wrought together

together with little bits of broken straws, to render it tough and tenacious. As this bird often builds against a perpendicular wall, without any projecting ledge under, it requires its utmost efforts, to get the first foundation firmly fixed, so that it may safely carry the superstructure. On this occasion, the bird not only clings with its claws, but partly supports itself by strongly inclining its tail against the wall, making that a *fulcrum*; and thus steadied, it works and plaisters the materials into the face of the brick or stone. But then, that this work may not, while it is soft and green, pull itself down by its own weight, the provident architect has prudence and forbearance enough, not to advance its works too fast; but by building only in the morning, and by dedicating the rest of the day to food and amusement, gives it sufficient time to dry and harden. About half an inch seems to be a sufficient layer for a day. Thus careful workmen, when they build mud-walls, informed at first perhaps by this little bird, raise but a moderate layer at a time, and then desist; lest the work should become top-heavy, and so be ruined by its own weight. By this method, in about ten or twelve days, is formed an hemispheric nest, with a small aperture towards the top; strong, compact, and warm; and perfectly fitted for all the purposes, for which it was intended: but then nothing is more common than for the house-sparrow, as soon as the shell is finished, to seize on it, as its own; to eject the owner, and line it after its own manner.

Though so much labour is bestowed in erecting a mansion, yet as Nature seldom works in vain, martin

tins will breed on, for several years together, in the same nest, where it happens to be well sheltered, and secure from the injuries of weather. The shell, or crust, is a sort of rustic work, full of knobs and protuberances on the outside: nor is the inside, of those that I have examined, smoothed with any exactness at all; but is rendered soft and warm and fit for incubation, by a lining of small straws, grasses, and feathers, and, sometimes, by a bed of moss, interwoven with wool. In this nest they tread or engender frequently, during the time of building; and the hen lays from three to five eggs. At first when the young are hatched, and are in a naked and helpless condition, the parent birds, with tender assiduity, carry out what comes from their young. Was it not for this affectionate cleanliness, the nestlings would soon be burnt up, and destroyed, in their own caustic excrement. In the quadruped creation the same neat precaution is made use of; particularly among dogs and cats, where the dams lick away what proceeds from their young. But, in birds, there seems to be a particular provision, as the dung of nestlings is enveloped in a tough kind of jelly, and therefore is the easier conveyed off without soiling or daubing; yet, as Nature is cleanly in all her ways, the young perform this office for themselves in a little time, by thrusting their tails out at the aperture of the nest. As the young of small birds presently arrive at their *ἡλικία*, or full growth, they soon become impatient of confinement, and sit all day with their heads out at the orifice, where the dams, by clinging to the nest, supply them with food from morning to night.

For a time the young are fed, on the wing, by their parents; but the feat is done by so quick, and almost imperceptible, a flight, that a person must have attended very exactly to their motions, before he would be able to perceive it. As soon as the young are able to shift for themselves, the dams immediately turn their thoughts to the business of a second brood; while the first flight, shaken off and rejected by their nurses, congregate in great flocks, and are the birds that are seen clustering and hovering, on sunny mornings and evenings, round towers and steeples, and on the roofs of churches and houses. These congregations usually take place first, about the first week in August; and therefore we may conclude, that, by that time, the first flight is pretty well over.

It has been observed, that martins usually build to a N. E. or N. W. aspect, that the heat of the Sun may not crack and destroy their nests; but instances are also remembered, where they bred for many years, in vast abundance, in a hot stified inn-yard, against a wall facing to the S. W. and W. Birds in general are wise in their choice of situation; but, in this neighbourhood, every summer, is seen a strong proof to the contrary, at an house without eaves, in an exposed spot; where some martins build, year by year, in the corners of the windows; but, as the corners of these windows, which face to the S. S. E. and S. W. are too shallow, the nests are washed down every hard rain; and yet these birds drudge on to no purpose, from summer to summer, without changing their aspect or house. It is piteous to see them labouring and bringing dirt, when half their nest

nest is washed away—" *generis lapsi sarcire ruinas.*" Thus is instinct a most wonderful, but unequal faculty; in some instances so much above reason, in other respects so far below it!

Martins love to frequent towns, especially if there are great lakes and rivers at hand: nay, they even affect the close air of London. And I have not only seen them nesting in the Borough, but even in the Strand and Fleet-street; but then it was obvious, from the dinginess of their aspect, that their feathers partook of the filth of that footy atmosphere.

Martins are by far the least agile of the four species. Their wings and tails are short; and therefore they are not capable of such surprizing short turns, and quick and glancing evolutions, as the swallow. Accordingly they make use of a placid easy motion, seldom mounting to any great height, and never sweeping long together over the surface of the ground or water. They do not wander far for food, but affect sheltered districts over some lake, or under some hanging wood, or in some hollow vale, especially in windy weather. They breed the latest of all the swallow *genus*: in 1772 they had nestlings on to October 21st, and are never without unfledged young, as late as Michaelmas. As the summer declines, the congregating flocks increase in number daily, by the constant accession of the second broods; till at last they swarm, in myriads upon myriads, round the villages on the Thames, darkening the face of the sky, whilst they frequent the eyetts of that river, where they roost. They retire, for the bulk of them, in vast flocks together about the  
beginning

beginning of October; but have appeared of late years, in a considerable flight, in this neighbourhood, for one day or two, as late as November the 3d and 6th; after they were supposed to have been gone for more than a fortnight. They therefore withdraw with us the latest of any species. Unless these birds are very short-lived indeed, or unless they do not return to the district where they are bred, they must undergo vast devastations some how, and some where; for the birds, that return yearly, bear no manner of proportion to the birds that retire.

House-martins are distinguished from their *congeners*, by having their legs covered, with soft downy feathers, down to their toes. They are no songsters; but twitter in a pretty inward soft manner in their nests: are greatly molested in their nests by fleas; and annoyed by a large dipterous insect, with narrow subulated wings, which crawls about under their feathers, and is known by the name of *hippobosca hirundinis*: a species of which is familiar to horsemen under the name of forest-fly; and to some under the name of side-fly, as it runs sideways like a crab, creeping under the tails and about the groins of horses.

Thus does all the creation prey upon one another; and these birds, though insect-eaters themselves, are distressed and tormented by insects.

I am, DEAR SIR, with the greatest respect,

Your obliged and most obedient servant,

Selborne,  
Nov. 20, 1773.

GIL. WHITE.