

Wall-nesting Sand Martins

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Plate 210. The north wall of Bothwell Castle (with nest holes circled), Clyde, 24 April 2018. © Jimmy Maxwell

Bothwell Castle is a very imposing medieval fortress set high above the River Clyde near Bothwell, South Lanarkshire (Plate 210). On a visit there on 24 April 2018, I was walking along outside the north wall when the buzzing sounds of hirundines above caught my attention. At first, I supposed these to be House Martins probably nesting under the ramparts but on looking up, I realised that they were Sand Martins. I counted about a dozen in all, circling around above me and to my surprise, occasionally birds would break away and shoot up into the high sandstone wall. Soon I realised that they were entering holes and crevices in the crumbling mortar between the heavy stone blocks. The first (Plate 211) with Sand Martin exiting, and the other (Plate 212) showing a double set of used holes. Birds would make repeated flights into the same holes and often two would go in together. I counted in all 13 holes being used, much as they would be in a sand bank nesting colony. Occasionally, two or three birds would collect at a nest hole (Plate 213) and often there appeared to be a bit of aggression (Plate 214).



Plate 211. Sand Martin exiting a nest hole, Bothwell Castle, Clyde, 14 May 2018. © Lang Stewart



Plate 212. Nest holes in the mortar layer, Bothwell Castle, Clyde, 5 May 2018. © Jimmy Maxwell



Plate 213. Three Sand Martins at nest hole, Bothwell Castle, Clyde, 14 May 2018. © Lang Stewart



Plate 214. Two Sand Martins scrapping, Bothwell Castle, Clyde, 15 May 2018. © Lang Stewart



Plate 215. Avon riverbank showing metal sides, Hamilton, Clyde, 15 June 2018. © Jimmy Maxwell



Plate 216. Sand Martin chicks about to fledge, Prestonpans, Lothian, 30 June 2018. © James Wallace



Plate 217. Jackdaw at its nest cavity, Bothwell Castle, Clyde, 24 April 2018. © Jimmy Maxwell

There are artificial walls specially constructed for colonies, notably at Bobby Smith's sanctuary at Applegarthtown, near Lockerbie (Dumfries & Galloway) and at the SWT reserve at Montrose Basin. Sand Martins sometimes nest in cliffs and I have seen them occupying drainage holes in the sheet metal sides of the River Avon at Hamilton (Plate 215).

There is no reference to wall-nesting Sand Martins in BWP but there were records of them nesting in quay and warehouse walls in Cork City, Ireland in 2014 (Harry Hussey in www.birdforum.net/showthread.php?t=285567), and in 2017 after *Birdwatch Ireland* requested sightings of Sand Martins using riverside walls. There are also records from Wroclaw, Poland of this species nesting in the stone pillars of old bridges (reference as above). Interestingly and nearer to home, we lately received a photograph of a nest site in a wall at Prestonpans, East Lothian (Plate 216).

I returned to Bothwell Castle on 7 June to find numbers much reduced and only seven seen in the air at one time although holes were still being visited. I wondered if there could have been predation from the colony of Jackdaws in the castle - three pairs were nesting on the same north wall (Plate 217). Whatever the cause, the castle wall will certainly never suffer from the vagaries of sand erosion and increasing water levels which bedevil the normal sand bank colony.

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