

A large flock of Sand Martins *Riparia riparia* staying on the ground

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Staying on the ground, for feeding, bathing, roosting or mating is considered an unusual behaviour in the Hirundinidae family. Here we describe the observation of up to about 2,000 Sand Martins Riparia riparia staying together on the ground, forming a large flock, in the Ebro Delta (Tarragona, NE Spain). Birds stayed there for seven days, being only recorded during the last hours of the day. Circumstantial evidence suggest that the birds were just resting between migration episodes or have formed a flock prior to going to the roost.

Key words : *Riparia riparia*, Sand Martin, resting behaviour, flock size, Ebro Delta.

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Staying on the ground is considered an unusual behaviour in the Hirundinidae family (Cramp 1988). Present records of this behaviour include birds staying on the ground while bathing (sunbathing, dust-bathing), preening and/or shuffling (Thom 1947, Carr 1968, Nicholson 1981); birds feeding on the ground to mate (Thom 1947, King 1955, Carr 1968); and birds staying on the ground to roost (Nelson 1973).

On 11th September 1991 we observed in the Erms de la Tancada (Sant Jaume d'Enveja, Ebro Delta, NE Spain) a flock of about two thousand Sand Martins *Riparia riparia* staying on the ground on a big sand beach with halophil vegetation). This situation was repeated for seven days, the number of individuals varying from one to three thousand. It is unknown if it was always the same flock all the time or if

there was a continuous turnover in the flock. The birds were just resting on the ground in the latest hours of the day (5:00 - 8:00 pm) but they did not stay overnight there. The weather was mild and sunny during these days.

This observation does not fit any of the previous descriptions of birds staying on the ground. During bathing or shuffling flocks are small and stay on the ground for a short time (Nicholson 1981). This was clearly not the case here.

Feeding on the ground has been described for isolated or small flocks (Clegg 1984). Owing to the natural conditions where our large flock was found (near pools with vegetation, where great numbers of airborne invertebrates, like flies, dragonflies, moths, sawflies, etc. could be easily caught while flying) it does not seem feasible that birds had landed for feeding

there.

Given the period in which the observation was made (September), a massive instance of copulation on the ground, common in post-breeding flocks (King 1955) in July (Thorn 1947), can be discounted.

The roosting possibility can also be discounted since birds were not found there during the night. Additionally, the large reed-bed, which is often used by the species to roost (Aspinwall et al. 1975) -, and the numerous cables of the telegraph poles present near the observation place, make roosting on the ground improbable.

It therefore seems that the most probable interpretation of the observed behaviour was that birds were resting meanwhile in migration or have formed a flock prior to going to roost. •

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RESUM

Un gran grup d'orenetes de ribera paradés al terra.

L'onze de setembre de 1991 van ser observades unes 2.000 orenetes de ribera Riparia riparia paradés al terra. La revisió de casos similars, com ara ocells parats al terra per banyar-se, arreglar-se el plomatge, menjar,

passar la nit o reproduir-se porta a la conclusió que l'observació no es pot relacionar amb cap dels comportaments descrits fins ara. Eliminades les anteriors possibilitats, la interpretació més plausible és que els ocells estiguessin descansant entre episodis de migració o s'agrupessin abans d'anar a dormir.

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