SAND MARTIN.

Hirundo riparia, Linn.
L'Hirondelle de rivage.

With the exception of the place chosen for the purpose of incubation, the Sand Martin resembles its congeners; but in this respect the whole tribe of which this delicate species forms a part, are singularly different, both as regards the form of their nests and the situations chosen for their reception: for instance, if we examine the four species which take up their summer residence in the British Islands, we find that the Swift is directed to ruins, particularly inaccessible towers, and large public buildings; the Swallow gives preference to the entrances of chimneys and the mouths of pits; while the little Fairy Martin adheres its hard clay nest to the sides of our dwellings, as if to court our protection and care; and the delicate little bird which forms the subject of the present plate is directed by the impulse of nature to nidify in places remarkably different from either of these, viz., steep and precipitous sand-banks, pits of chalk, &c., more particularly the former, appearing to give a preference to banks overhanging water, though we have occasionally observed their breeding-places far remote from any water. In the most inaccessible parts of these situations this little excavator digs a horizontal hole of considerable depth, sometimes even to three or four feet, at the far end of which it places a nest, loosely constructed of dried grass and feathers, in which are deposited four or five delicate eggs, of a clear white. As soon as the young gain sufficient strength, they reach the edge of their subterraneous passage, and at an early period wing their way after their parents, who soon teach them to capture insects for themselves and become independent of their assistance.

The task of reproduction being performed, the Sand Martin congregates in flocks, which are greatly augmented by the end of autumn, at which period the multitude assembled almost surpasses belief. The naturalist cannot look upon the vast herd of these little birds which collect to roost in the osier-beds on the banks of the Thames before their final departure, without admiring the design of an all-wise Creator in protecting these humble creatures during the period above alluded to, as by their means alone are kept in subjection the vast myriads of insects, which would otherwise become so numerous as to defy the power of man, with all his ingenuity, either to annihilate, or to work any apparent diminution of their numbers.

We have often observed the Sand Martin as early as the month of March, from which circumstance it must be ranked among the earliest of our summer visitors. There are few birds that have a more extensive range, being common throughout Europe, the continent of Africa, some portions of India, and, if we mistake not, it is spread over a great portion of the American continent.

It feeds exclusively on flies, which it captures on the wing, being endowed with powers of flight equal to any other species of the genus.

The sexes are alike in plumage, and the young of the year resemble the adults, except that the feathers of the upper parts are edged with a lighter margin.

The top of the head, upper surface, the body, and tail dark brown; throat, belly, and under tail-coverts white; primaries, bill, and feet blackish brown.

The young of the year have the same colouring as the adult, except that each feather on the upper surface is bordered with yellowish white.

We have figured an adult, and a young bird of the year, of the natural size.