

Purple Martin Chatter

A Publication of the Wisconsin Purple Martin Association

Fall 2020



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Wow, I can't believe it, where did the summer go? The time that we get to share with these purple martins sure goes fast, and sadly, our martin season is over for this year. My hope is that all of you enjoyed a memorable birding season. If you're like me, you're probably going through a little withdrawal. In addition to missing the martins, I can also say we sure missed getting together with all of you this summer at Martinfest. I'm hopeful that we will be able to host the event again next year at Marsh Haven Nature Center.

Although we have not been able to host any events, we have been busy promoting purple martins, Dick Nikolai has been banding purple martins at various colonies around the state; a look at the cover really tells it all. The cover shows Dick at Brain Thays colony banding martins, and it happens, Brian had the good fortune of raising an albino. Brian will tell you more about his colony and his experience with purple martins later in the newsletter. In addition to banding, Dick, is very much involved in the research of these birds, this summer he and Bob Ring successfully installed geo transmitters on several martins, the hope is that these birds will return next season and be recaptured and the transmitter data recovered and analyzed. Dick too will provide more detail about this project later in the newsletter. Other features in the edition will be an article on aerial predation. This summer I have heard a few unfortunate stories of both hawk and owl attacks, Hopefully we can offer some help on this subject.

On a personal level, at our colony, my wife and I were thankful to end a 5 year drought as we were happy to host two pairs of birds this season. 2015 was the last year for us hosting birds; we had one pair, and fledged 3 chicks. This year we had two pairs and fledged 9 chicks, low by other colony standards, but for us, a very successful and rewarding season. In fact, we enjoyed watching birds come and go as late as August 24. We are optimistic for 2021.

If you were unable to attract martins to your site this year, don't give up, now is the perfect time to evaluate your setup and make any necessary changes for next year, don't wait until spring. What I can tell you is that our colony in 2020 does not resemble what it looked like in 2015. Some changes that affected the environment surrounding our colony were necessary, like having to remove a giant ash tree that was nearly dead, due to the emerald ash borer, and a large beautiful weeping willow. Prior to those trees coming down, I thought that we had a very open site by PMCA standards, but, after the tree was taken down, wow, completely different. As far as housing, in 2015 we had two 8 compartment Northstar houses, fast forward to 2020 and we have one 8 compartment Northstar, a T10, and an 8 compartment PMC 2000 house. All housing is Starling resistant.

Something else that we did, was not so much of a change, but a change of strategy. And it has to do with tree Swallows. These last two years we made sure that the tree swallows were not competing for the martin housing; we did this by providing a Troyer horizontal gourd for them within 30 feet of the colony, we actively recruited them to that specific gourd by using a flasher and by providing feathers in their starter nest. If you're not familiar with a flasher, it's just a piece of flat plastic tied to a string hanging above the gourd. I make my flashers out of the lid of a cottage cheese container, blue on one side and white on the other, sound familiar? One important aspect is that you need to wait until these birds get settled and produce at least one egg before adding any gourds to the martin housing, this by the way, seemed to take forever. In fact it was not until we added gourds under the houses that we attracted martins. Prior to that we had visitors, but they seemed to ignore the wood housing, go figure. The other major change that was made for the 2020 season was how we were attracting migrating martins to our site. We had been using the songbird magnet, however, after going through 2 units in the last three years, we decided to go in a different direction. An old laptop was recruited and Dawnsong as well as Daytime Chatter were loaded on it's hard drive. We used the Task Scheduler feature of the computer to play Dawnsong starting at 11:00 each night and ending at 8:00 in the morning. We then played Chatter until 5:00 in the evening. The laptop was hooked up to an outdoor speaker, with the speaker mounted at the base of one of the houses; unfortunately the laptop was a little underpowered, so an old pair of computer speakers were used as a power source, the preamp in the computer speakers gave it just what we needed. That system worked almost flawlessly, we will definitely have that in place again and ready to go for 2021, just in case.

(Cont'd on page 3)

(Cont'd from page 2)

The bottom line is that now is the time to not only clean up the housing from this season, but it's a great time to set your goals for the next season; start making the plan and working toward it so that you will be ready when spring rolls around. If you need help, contact any one of us, that's what we're here for. So, for now, sit back and enjoy this edition of the Purple Martin Chatter.

One final thought, now is also a good time to provide Dick Nikolai with your 2020 colony results. Taking the time to do this really helps in determining the health and populations of birds in our state, and don't forget to submit reports to the PMCA as well.

Les Rhines
WPMA President

Cancellation Notice:

The 2021 Garden & Landscape Expo held at the Aliant Energy Center scheduled for February 2021 is canceled. Event organizers are proposing a virtual event., and will provide more details as they become available.

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A message from the vice president:

Hello to all fellow Martin Landlords. If you're like me things are starting to settle down as far as birds go. My colony had a whopping 153 eggs this year from 36 pairs of birds. Of the 153 eggs laid 147 hatched. I did lose 6 young birds that never made it to fledgling; the rest of my colony did really well despite another poor spring. As I write this I have 2 nests that are only 3 weeks old and will allow me to enjoy Martins into early September. I did supplemental feeding for most of April and then once in late June only because we had 3 cool rainy days. The birds were bringing in food; the June feeding was only to help keep all my birds well fed. Of my 36 nests 32 were all ASY birds with the rest being SY's, hence the 2 late nesters. I have one very aggressive SY male that keeps me on my toes. When I approach my colony he is very acrobatic with his dive bombing and his squawks can be deafening. This year will go down in the books as a great season for me; Jan Kumrow's site did really well this year as most of you know we lost Ike, Jan's husband almost 2 years ago. Her family has stepped up and is keeping Ike's colony in great shape, Larry Lienau's site did just as well this year and he even added another house. I do believe Nicky Schumacher had a pair of birds this year. This is a first for Nicky who has been trying for several years and hopefully will have more success next year. One of our public colonies has hosted at least 4 pairs this year. That colony is located at the Pine Haven retirement and assisted living home in Sheboygan Falls. As I finish up my message I'd like to say thanks to all landlords.

Have a safe and happy fall.

Greg

Treasurers report;

I am happy to report we have received 16 memberships this year. Our check book balance is \$223.52 and our savings is \$613.49. In May we bought Geo locaters, a great investment for future study.

Our new members are:

Rick Hall, Pat Hermsen, Gary Kleppe, Bob Frenkel, Ken Verhagen, Jean Urry, Brad Ladgren, John Jurgerson, Charles Meyer, Helen Pugh, James Buchholz, Randy Wiskirchen, Terry Mentink, Jack Saltas and Joe & Eileen Francis.

I hope all of you had Martins this year.

Debbie Zimmermann

Thank You to everyone that has decided to take out a membership with the Wisconsin Purple Martin Association; if you are considering a membership please contact Debbie Zimmermann.

You can become a member of the Wisconsin Purple Martin Association by contacting Treasurer Deb Zimmermann at dpierce52@yahoo.com membership fee is \$10.00 annually. Benefits of membership are; Public Meetings, MartinFest, Statewide Mentor Program, Free Site Evaluations, Managed Public Colonies, and Newsletters.

Aerial Predators

If you have a Purple Martin colony you've probably witnessed a Cooper's Hawk fly through your site, worse yet, you may have lost birds to these aerial predators. One could say, oh well, it's just nature, but it's frustrating for landlords to witness, especially after going through the painstaking supplemental feeding program to keep birds healthy through those tough Wisconsin springs. We accept our role to keep our colonies free of other unwanted species, like house sparrows and starlings. But it's not only the Cooper's that we have to guard against; we also have to be aware of owls and Red Tail Hawks too.

This summer proved to be especially difficult for two colonies ravaged by Red Tail Hawks, and/or owls; the first example was at a golf course colony that normally hosts a number of pairs and is monitored regularly, the colony is also observed by many golfers daily. Unfortunately, it did not deter the Red Tail from destroying the housing and killing many martins over frequent visits.



The second example was at a state park that over a two year period has predated the colony that no fledglings survived.

So, what can be done? First, we have to remind everyone that all hawks and owls are protected and cannot be trapped or harmed. Our focus then has to be and should be on the prevention of the attacks and the protection of the purple martins. The remainder of this article will try to outline some strategies we can employ to help save our colonies.

Trees provide a haven for predators: When selecting a site for a martin colony we must maintain safe distances from tall mature trees; the standards say 60 minimum, but more is better. Many times people fail to recruit martins to their site because of the proximity to tall mature trees.

Aerial Predator Guards:

There are many different styles of predator guards designed to keep aerial predators at bay; some are specifically designed for wood and metal housing while others are designed for natural and manmade gourds.

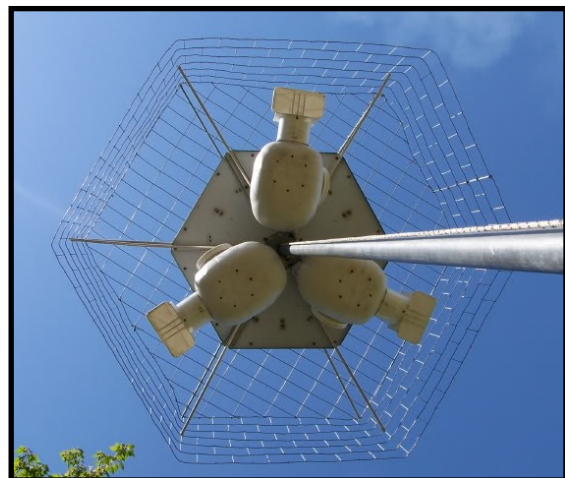
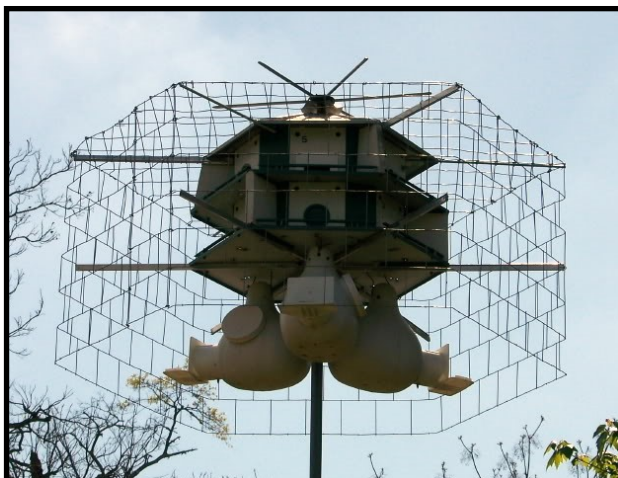


The picture of the left displays a T14 house that uses metal rods extended beyond the porches, this allows martins to enter and exit easily but it makes it more difficult for hawks and owls to land on the house.

The picture on the right shows a gourd with a metal bracket and rods that again extend beyond the entrance; again, easy for martins to enter and exit but difficult for predators to land on.

The Cage System:

The cage system offers the greatest amount of protection for the martins, this is achieved by surrounding the entire house or gourd rack with wire fencing. Important things to consider here are: the size opening of the wire, the distance that the cage extends beyond the entrances, and the depth or height of the cage. Wire openings should be large enough that martins can move through easily; consider that in order for them to enter a compartment, they will first have to land on the cage, and then fly to the porch of the house or gourd. Cages are not available commercially and are typically built by individual landlords from material found at the home center. These custom built cages are attached to the top of the pole which still allows the house or gourd rack to be safely raised and lowered for nest checks. Depth or height is important as some predators will figure out how to get underneath as shown in the photo on the next page.





Scarecrows:

Scarecrows have become just one more tool in the toolbox for purple martin landlords in their attempt to protect their colonies. Many have written about the decrease in attacks since implementing the scarecrow to the colony. The strategy is to place a life like model within the colony; as you would expect, the martins get used to it quickly, the predators, however, tend to avoid what appears to be a human. To keep this strategy effective though, it is recommend that the scarecrow be moved daily, preferably at night.

Decoys:

While this discussion has centered around large predators, we should also address the smaller predators like Coopers hawks. Coopers are attracted to the normal day to day activity of the martin colony and they seem to come out of nowhere to make their attacks. While we cannot prevent an attack, we can try to minimize it by maintaining decoys on your housing. The theory is that as the martins disperse during an attack, the Coopers will focus on the "still" decoy on the housing. A preferred method of attaching the decoys to the house is to replace the provided clamp with either a clothespin or small clamp. This makes switching the decoys around easy. Personally, I have found decoys out of position or on the ground as a result of a Coopers attack. One other thing to consider is to have an additional pole with perch rods where martin decoys as well as dove decoys can be placed. The goal is to try and draw the attention of the hawk away from the colony.



Featured Colony: Brian Thays, Montello

I became interested in martins when I was about 10 years old. I always remember watching active colonies of martins where I grew up. I was raised in a small community called Harrisville, WI. Martins were fairly common in this area in the 70's and 80's. It seemed that almost everyone along the Harrisville Millpond had martins at some point in time. I tried for years to attract them to my parent's yard in Harrisville with no success. It seemed that everyone who lived near the water would attract them away from our yard. We never had a shortage of tree swallows however.

As an adult, I have never lost that interest to try and attract martins. My wife and I bought a small home in Westfield, Wisconsin, in 2005. With this being our first home together, I was so excited to buy a martin house and try again. We bought a beautiful Amish made martin house that looked like a church. Unfortunately, I was not knowledgeable about the PMCA at that time, until a local mentor friend of mine introduced me to the PMCA website. It didn't take long for me to realize that my beautiful Amish made martin house was going to be nothing short of a lawn ornament. It was a tilt down system with round holes. I didn't know any better, as this was all I had ever known from my childhood days. In addition, our yard was small and somewhat tree encroached. We took a few trees down to open up the north and south flyways. I played the Dawnsong every morning and Daytime Chatter throughout the day. For the first few years, I only had some occasional visitors. Then, in 2007, I built my first T14. The T14 was placed in the middle of our backyard in the spring of 2008. I hung some gourds underneath and played the recordings as in previous years. Nothing.....for the first 3 months. Then, on June 23rd of 2008, an ASY male martin showed up out of nowhere. He was so noisy. I was in complete disbelief. On June 24th, he had already attracted an SY female. They chose a round-holed Supergourd under the T14. They fledged 2 babies that summer. That martin pair returned in 2009 and again in 2010. They nested in the same gourd each season. I never was able to attract additional pairs of martins in that yard. Some of the larger trees were a deterrent. We just didn't have the wide open space necessary to grow that colony.

In 2011, we decided to sell our starter home in Westfield and buy a larger home in the country to help accommodate our growing family. I told my wife that I needed to find a home with martin friendly property. We looked and looked but nothing was in our price range or style that we wanted. After months of searching, we landed on a foreclosure just north of Montello, WI. The property was perfect, as was the home. We moved in during the fall of 2011. I also moved my T14 to the new property and hung some gourds. During the spring of 2012, I continued to play the Dawnsong and Daytime Chatter CD's daily from mid May through the summer. I was blessed with daily martin visits. Most of the visits were subadults. I never had a nesting pair during that first summer, but I felt like we had several martins around most of the time. In the spring of 2013, I took a personal day from work to rest at home. It was May 13th that day. I looked out the window at 7:30 am to see a pair of martins going in and out of my S&K barn martin house. I couldn't believe my eyes. My T14 sat empty just 60 feet away, but that cheap barn drew my first pair. I didn't care because I was so happy to have martins. That afternoon, a second ASY male showed up. By May 14th, I had 2 pairs of martins. Once the subadults moved through, I was able to attract 3 more pairs. I ended up with 5 pairs of birds that summer, but one of the pairs had a nest failure. I soon learned of the damage that blowfly maggots have on nestlings. By the summer of 2014, my colony grew to 10 pairs. In 2015, I had 21 pairs. Exponential growth was the key after that.

The summer of 2020 has been my 8th year with martins. I currently have 50 pairs and fledged close to 225 nestlings. One of those nestlings happened to be an albino martin. This was the first season I have ever been blessed with an albino bird. I was able to witness his first flight on July 13th, where he landed in a nearby tree. He returned several evenings after that day. By mid July, he was gone. My hope is that he is able to return in the spring of 2021, along with his many other brothers and sisters. Maybe they will start another new colony somewhere else, just as mine was started in 2013.

Recapping 2020 Purple Martin season in Wisconsin

By Dick Nikolai

Looking back at the 2020 Purple Martin season was quite a ride for us in Wisconsin. Nothing was normal except we knew spring was eventually coming. Our winter started early with lots of precipitation during October, November and most of December. The new year of 2020 started warmer with more normal precipitation. As March arrived it came in as a lamb and roared out with lots of precipitation and cooler than normal temperatures. April had Wisconsin divided into warm dry areas to the south and west from Milwaukee to Green Lake to Ashland along with a cooler and drier area to the north and east, especially cooler temperatures along Lake Michigan. Martins arrived slightly earlier in the south and northwest and slightly later in the east and north. With the cooler temperatures in the east, quite a few days were spent keeping after second year (ASY) martins warm in housing along with many days of feeding. Fresh insects were rare from vendors to throw in the air for feeding due to the pandemic much like us trying to find hoarded toilet paper. At least fresh eggs were easy to find to scramble and added to an appetite for our martins after their arrival. May arrived with cool temperatures along with many a day with east winds bringing precipitation. Shorelines along Lake Michigan eroded and even a few houses succumbed to the high water from the weather related circumstances.

Second year (SY) purple martins arrived about a week later than normal for most sections of Wisconsin. Unfavorable breezes held them up from the north or east. When June came around weather patterns became warmer than normal with drier areas from approximately Green Bay to Waupaca down to Montello, Wisconsin Dells then back to Sheboygan. All the other areas seemed to get more of the rain and storms, especially in the north or far south. These conditions provided for a wealth of insects that provided hungry young and adult purple martins for a third year at or above normal conditions. In May and early June, the cooler temperatures delayed nesting, added to added eggs or reduced hatching. Purple Martins along Lake Michigan had similar conditions as in 2017 when nesting was poor and cold weather created conditions unfavorable, however 2020 avoided the many cool nights and days that had very breezy conditions for several weeks.

Reports from the north and west had recovery from the tornadoes and storms of June and July 2019 in 2020. New colonies were established and many of the colonies in that region recovered to produce many young from expanded pairs from SY martins. The SY age class was very strong throughout Wisconsin no matter where I traveled in my limited capacity. With great production of eggs, better than average hatch, fledging at normal to high normal and an abundance of insects, our Wisconsin martins had the first three years in a row of success with few setbacks in over several decades.

Our success at High Cliff State Park was what I call normal. We had 80% hatch of eggs with 70% of those young making it to fledging. Approximately 60% of the eggs raised fledglings. Large colonies have a tendency to attract more predators and play a leading part of success or failure. We also had many second year pairs that laid eggs without any hatching. New parents have many things to learn and so success goes down. We are also tenacious in locating all young since we band most if not all the young and attempt capture on most of the parents that have young. Additionally we had many unpaired SY males that usurped food, created raids on young and fought with other males. Having more SY martins in the mix also drove the figures lower along with more losses of at least one parent in at least a dozen cavities. Last of all another 18 cavities had only eggs with no young hatching from the total of 119 nests with eggs. Bob Ring and I captured or

handled over 1500 purple martins with over 200 adults/sub-adults captured at four sites and young at nine sites. Composition of the ASY's captured was 58% versus 42% of SY martins with a recapture rate of 59% versus uncaptured at 41%. Recaptured males were 55% of the total versus 45% for females.

Several firsts were attained in 2020. Our first purple martin fitted with a red band still survives at a small colony near High Cliff State Park with the numerals **WI-500** on its left leg. Our last purple martin placed with a GPS Geolocator in 2019 was the only returnee from the 10,000-mile trek to South America and back. This martin utilized a cavity having a rectangular shaped opening destroying the radio antennae on its backpack. When prime nesting cavities are at stake obstacles are no match. Information from this backpack is being downloaded. Soon we will have an idea of where this male spent its time in South America and throughout its migration.

Wisconsin's first and second reported albino purple martin were found in two colonies separated by 30+ miles apart. One located near Waupun and the other at Montello. Both are now sporting color bands along with their siblings. Spent a lifetime looking for an albino purple martin encounter with both appearing in the same year during our pandemic. Scientific literature indicates that all birds have odds for albinism of one to 1,764 up to one to 18,000 births. References for robins and English sparrows top the list. For other species the literature was quite vague. Somewhere in my past I had seen a reference of one in 100,000 for purple martins but could not document it. Through the years, I have captured, banded or seen at least 100,000 martins so it is definitely rare. Thanks go to Brian Thays from Montello and Renee Wahlen (Marsh Haven Nature Center) from Waupun for their sharing those "*angels of flight*" as my aging mother indicated when seeing those albino purple martin photos. Managed to place six GPS Geolocators in 2020 on purple martins. We are now waiting patiently for 2021 martin season. While writing this note, on September 5 a report from Tennessee came, indicating one of our GPS Geolocator martins was seen or recovered. Still waiting to hear from the person who reported it to the Bird Banding Lab to contact me from emails sent or by phone messages left. Note that my desires from that individual does not equate to what one can get!

Last of all participated in several national surveys for 2020. One is for finding contaminants in young and adult purple martins determining whether the contaminants occur in Wisconsin or in South America. The second national survey is looking at genetics in a roost in Oklahoma by using young martin's feathers to determine where they are coming from North America to this roost site by using codes. From us in Wisconsin over 400 martins are being tested for contaminants along with another 200 for genetics. Time and patience will be the standard to learn how well we did for Wisconsin and on the wintering areas. Our breeding season for Wisconsin purple martins ended very recently. A pair brought off their fledglings near Mishicot close to the second weekend of September. These are important martins to catalog for we know very little of their vigilance of their survival and whether they contribute to the population or are an aberration. Last of all, our Wisconsin purple martin roost continues to show it presence of tens of thousands of martins along with many species of swallows. All of these parts of the puzzle give us some knowledge of why our long term population of purple martins is declining within Wisconsin. Stay tuned and aware of any future developments. Be aware that many purple martins carry jewelry that may be colored or silver as the typical bird band is made of aluminum. Ours are red background with white letters or numerals ranging from **WI-500** through **WI-999**. Other purple martins have tiny radios weighing a gram telling us useful information.

Most purple martins return to their colonies that have fledged young successfully. Martins do not read books on rules so any martin seen with any band including color bands make every effort to report to the Bird Banding Laboratory. Those may also have a GPS Geolocator and may be a small percentage of martins that went to another colony like the one ASY male martin a number of years ago resided 90 miles away in Pewaukee from our colony at High Cliff State Park. All your efforts assist in information retrieval. Thanks for listening, sharing pieces of the puzzle and for your efforts to propagate purple martins across Wisconsin.



Note the closure of many cavities with “duck tape” or the removable nest tray turned around blocking the entrance hole. This allows for preventing losses of purple martins while having them stay in specific cavities for the day or night when adverse weather conditions exist. Cavities that are left open have hand warmers with straw for added warmth and protection. They normally occur on the south and west sides of housing out of the cold winds preventing snow infiltration or ice build up. Communal night roosting is encouraged for greater warmth and survival benefits.



Brian Thays (Montello) above and Renee Wahlen (Waupun)
shown below with their young albino purple martins.





SY-M shown with color-bands above.

Dick Nikolai 7-18-2020



ASY-F shown below with GPS Geolocator on its back.

Dick Nikolai 7-18-2020