

Why I Founded the *Purple Martin* Conservation Association

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Ornithologist, James R. Hill, III, enjoying a magic moment while watching martins at the PMCA's research site in Edinboro, PA. He's a man obsessed with martins.

[This article was originally published in 1997, in *Purple Martin Update* 8(1), when the PMCA was just 10 years old. As of 2016, the PMCA is still going strong at 29 years old!]

I'm frequently asked, "WHY ON EARTH DID YOU DO IT?" "Why did you give up a lucrative job, sell most of your earthly possessions, and start a nonprofit conservation organization (i.e., the Purple Martin Conservation Association) just to help some purple bird?" The answer is, because I had to. The research I was conducting at the time revealed that the Purple Martin needed help, BIG HELP. Several things were conspiring against it. The just-published North American Breeding Bird Survey showed that the Purple Martin population was undergoing long-term declines over vast areas of its breeding range, while at the same time, large numbers were reported dying of unknown causes on their Brazilian wintering grounds. I also recognized that the human cultural tradi-

tion of putting up housing for martins was dying out as society became more urban and less rural. Worse yet, most people who were putting up housing for martins weren't doing it correctly or successfully. Instead of attracting martins, their houses were just fledging nonnative House Sparrows and European Starlings, the martins' worst nest-site competitors. In other words, despite their good intentions, most people erecting martin housing were doing more harm to the species than good. The final motivation for me to do something was the lack of reliable information. The only information available to martin landlords was that being disseminated by martin house manufacturers. These folks had questionable agendas, no training in biology, rarely consulted the scientific literature, and often promoted the martin using myths, biases, and propaganda! Landlords were drowning in a sea of misinformation. Obviously, there was an urgent need for a scientifically-based conservation organization to help the Purple

Martin and to educate martin landlords. So, in 1987, I officially created the nonprofit, tax-exempt charity known as the *Purple Martin Conservation Association*.

I formed the *PMCA*, in part, to help instruct martin enthusiasts in the best techniques for attracting and assisting this bird so completely dependent on them. I also founded the organization so there would be a central data-gathering and information source available on the species, serving both the scientist and the martin enthusiast. And finally, I did it as a way to encourage more people to put up housing for martins, so their population could grow. I wanted more people to experience the sheer joy that a colony of martins can bring to their lives.

As a way for our members to get to know me better, I am writing the rest of this article as if it were an interview. The questions are ones that members frequently ask me.

What is your educational background and how did you become interested in Purple Martins?

In 1975, I earned a Bachelor of Science degree in Biology at the Edinboro University of Pennsylvania, which is located in my hometown. During my last year there, I happened to take a course in Ornithology. The experience was such an epiphany for me, that I knew I had to devote the rest of my life to birds. To further my education, I went on to graduate school at Penn State University where, in 1982, I earned a Masters of Science degree in Ecology, with a minor in Wildlife Management. The title of my Master's thesis was "Nest Reuse in the Barn Swallow," and I conducted my field research at 35 different farms. While in the library researching the life history of the Barn Swallow, I read everything I could on the other North American swallows, including the Purple Martin. This is how I became interested and reacquainted with the martin. I say reacquainted, because when I was a child, the summer camp across the street from my home had a thriving colony of martins in two wooden houses atop large metal poles. I remember sneaking across the street and shaking those poles to make the birds explode out of their houses in terror. I did this to be mischievous and to impress my young friends. I really enjoyed the thrill of those stealthy raids, especially the strong reaction I was able to evoke in those mysterious birds. As a result, I shook those poles a lot. In hindsight, I guess I've never really grown up.

I'm still "shaking" martin poles, only today I'm not sneaky about it and do it in the name of science and animal husbandry. Now instead of being called a "prank," I've given it a more respectable name; it's now called "doing a nest check." Obviously, old habits die hard.

How would you describe your relationship with the Purple Martin?

I'm so obsessed with martins that I couldn't find a pair of pants to wear to my high school's 25th class reunion, because every pair I owned was stained with martin droppings. My van is so full of ornithological equipment that it's a major chore to put in a seat for a passenger. And, in the name of science, my chest freezer is filled with so many expired martins, that the ice cubes take on the odor and flavor of the birds in their various stages of decay. I'm a man who frequently traverses the distance of three

states in a day's time to check nests, band babies, and educate martin landlords. I guess you could say I live, breathe, and dream Purple Martins!

What are your hopes for the future of the PMCA? When members visit the *PMCA's* headquarters in Edinboro, PA, many are surprised to discover that we run the entire operation out of a small, private home, which we rent, not own. Based on the professional and upscale image we project with our magazine, catalog, and products, most people expect to find a fancy, expensive visitor center. We don't have one, but some day hope to. That's my dream for the next 10 years; to accumulate the funds necessary to build a real visitor center, one with educational displays, a small museum, offices, a conference room, and a small theater. Outside there would be wetlands, hiking trails, and lots of green acreage. About 100 pairs of martins would breed in housing just 25 feet from the visitor center's large, second-story deck, allowing people an intimate, eye-level view of a martin colony. For this dream to become reality, the *PMCA* will need large-scale corporate funding and the generous support of its members. And it wouldn't hurt if a few wealthy members would remember us when making out their wills.

I would also love to see our membership grow in size from its current plateau of 6,500 members, to a much more effective



Jack Hamrahan @ Erie Times News © 1991

Although we at the PMCA do not encourage martin landlords to make pets of their martins, sometimes we can't resist giving a helping hand to a youngster in need. Here James R. Hill, III, allows a young martin a moment's respite on a handy digit before returning it to its nest.

15,000 or 20,000. We could do this if each of our members would either buy a gift membership for a landlord friend, or persuade just one other hobbyist to support us. I also wish that I could convince each *PMCA* member to introduce at least one new person into the martin hobby annually, and mentor them along to success.

Which of your accomplishments these past 10 years have brought you the most pride and satisfaction?

I'm extremely proud of the *PMCA's* research program. We're about to begin our 15th season of data collection (I started before the *PMCA* was formed). In 14 years, we've learned a lot of fascinating and useful facts about martins, and have dispelled a number of myths. We're about to enter our third year of color-banding and our fourth year investigating martin diet. These, as well as the Colony Registration Program, the Scout-arrival Survey, and Project Martinwatch all excite me with their long-term potentials.

I'm also extremely proud of the quality of our color membership magazine. We receive so many compliments on the *Update* that we've had to widen the doorways in the office so my head will fit through, and we have been succeeding beyond our wildest dreams in spreading the word about martins. Our mailing list now holds the addresses of over 100,000 people who have written for information. I'm also proud to have played a

role in helping make many innovative new products available to martin landlords, including the Prognosticator, the dawn song tape and CD, the eggshell feeder, the gourd canopy, the fallout shelter, the Starling/House Sparrow nest-box trap, the repeating bait trap, the deluxe gourd rack system, and most recently, the plastic SuperGourd.

As Director of the *PMCA*, what are some of your greatest frustrations? It really frustrates and alarms me that so few martin landlords actively manage their sites. Active management means doing frequent nest checks (i.e., every 4 to 7 days), eliminating nest-site competitors, controlling nest parasites, offering eggshells

and nesting material, and using predator guards. Unmanaged sites fledge significantly fewer nestlings. In our studies over the last several years, an intensively-managed martin colony site fledged an average of 2.8 nestlings per nesting attempt, whereas a similar, unmanaged site nearby only fledged an abysmal 1.4 nestlings per attempt. Clearly, active management can DOUBLE the nesting success of breeding martins! Why then do so many landlords not

do nest checks? Most don't do nest checks because they feel it's harmful and disruptive tampering. Clearly, the data show just the opposite. Others don't do it because their housing won't allow it. These people need to modify their housing. Still others don't do nest checks because their lives are too busy and hectic. These folks need to reexamine their priorities or enlist the help of a neighbor. Based on the statistics above, I feel it's irresponsible when landlords don't monitor and manage the martin nests under their care. Along those lines, it disturbs me that only about 100 of our 6,500 members participate in Project Martinwatch! [This number has grown exponentially since this article was written.] Every landlord with an active site needs to participate. This is the most important, wide-scale monitoring project ever undertaken on martins and has the potential to dramatically help the species' population, but only if landlords will cooperate. If you love and care for Purple Martins, PLEASE PARTICIPATE!!



James R. Hill, III, standing next to an experimental T-14 martin house, equipped with both crescent-shaped and oval starling-resistant entrance holes.

Louise Chambers © 1996

Another thing that frustrates me is the number of new companies that enter the martin housing market each year with grossly-inadequate products. The vast majority of these manufacturers don't know the first thing about the needs of Purple Martins, and if they do contact us first for design advice, they invariably choose to ignore most of what we tell them. One manufacturer we dealt with went so far as to try to export his houses to Saudi Arabia! When we told him that Purple Martins only occur in the New World and that there were no colonial cavity-nesters in that country, he said he would look into having some martins released there! This should give you an idea of the mentality of some of these folks. Astonishingly, many of these companies are able to

survive and successfully peddle their wares because of how trusting, uninformed, and downright gullible the average first-time consumer of martin products is.

How do you feel about those martin house manufacturers who falsely claim in their advertising that a Purple Martin can eat 2000 mosquitoes per day? It greatly disturbs me. Because such claims fail the test of scientific substantiation, one could argue that they are a violation of the Federal Trade Commission's Truth in Advertising laws. Do these manufacturers actually believe their own diet claims, or are they just using them as a sales ploy? If manufacturers honestly believe their own claims, then I think consumers need to use extra caution in assessing their products, since such erroneous assertions demonstrate just how little these manufacturers seem to know about the biology of the bird they profess expertise on. If they are so ignorant about something as basic as the martin's diet, why should we, as consumers, have confidence in their ability to design and build a birdhouse that can meet the rest of a martin's biological needs? No fewer than 35 papers exist in the scientific literature that deal with the insects taken by Purple Martins. Apparently, some of these manufacturers don't read or use a library. In only a fraction of these diet studies were mosquitoes ever found, and even then in such infinitesimally small numbers as to be considered totally insignificant, if not downright accidental. In the longest running (3 years), most comprehensive diet study ever conducted on Purple Martins, my assistants and I have yet to find a single mosquito among the 355 beakfuls of insects we've collected from parent martins feeding their nestlings from dawn to dusk. Not a single mosquito in three years, despite all 13 of our study sites being adjacent to mosquito-infested swamps or meadows! I say, "if the word 'mosquito' appears in their hype, you, the consumer, should recognize it as tripe." Buyer Beware!

What's even more disturbing is how many of these same manufacturers refuse to upgrade their decades-old house designs despite a wealth of recently-discovered design innovations that have proven extremely beneficial to both martins and martin landlords.

What has been the most rewarding part of working full-time with Purple Martins these past 10 years? Without question, the most rewarding by-product of this job has been the wonderful people I've met and the many friends I've made. I'm one of the luckiest people I know because this martin obsession has brought me in contact with thousands of special people, many of whom share my passions. These include my coworkers, volunteers, scientific advisors, board of trustees, university staff, vendors, magazine editors, printers, ornithologists, birdwatchers, and best of all, martin landlords from all over the continent. Because of my unique relationship with these birds, I have been fortunate enough to form some extraordinary friendships in both North and South America. Several of these have been with the Amish who have welcomed me into their homes and lives, and opened my eyes on matters both complex and simple. It's clear to me that Purple Martins have



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James R. Hill, III, holding a natural gourd that has been equipped with an in-cavity surveillance camera enabling him and his staff to watch, listen, and record a Purple Martin pair's entire 75-day-long nesting cycle (both night and day), from a television monitor and speaker inside his office.

been my unique passport into the lives and hearts of people whose paths I never would have crossed otherwise. That's one of the unexpected benefits of hosting Purple Martins, they can bring even the most unlikely people together into lifelong friendships.

James R. Hill, III, is Founder and Executive Director Emeritus of the Purple Martin Conservation Association (PMCA). He has been hosting Purple Martins continuously since 1981. For more information on martins, please contact the PMCA at <www.purplemartin.org>.

