

Rewards of Being a Volunteer!

By Darren R. Copley and Eric L. Walters

What does a boot, a hammer, a boat and your sanity have in common? They're all things you can lose when you volunteer to help out Purple Martins. In the July/August, 1990 issue of the *Victoria Naturalist* (47.1:4) we wrote an article on the Purple Martin Nest Box Programme. Since we started erecting nest boxes many things have happened. We thought we'd share some of our adventures with you as well as report on how the martins fared this year here in British Columbia.

The project began in April of this year when we started building nest boxes. First of all, one has to determine what the nest boxes should look like. After talking to several people and reading various references on the subject, we had as many different nest box designs as there are "know-it-all" politicians in Victoria. We ended up with a hybrid form called the Harold Pollock - Calvor Palmateer - Bryan Gates - Cam Finlay - Wayne Campbell design.

When constructing the nest boxes, one of our discoveries about our old radial arm saw was that you can actually adjust the fender over the blade. To our amazement, this fender stopped the sawdust from flying into our faces. It was a nice change to be able to work in the shop without a gas mask. We, of course, realized this after completing over 150 nest boxes.

After contending with the construction phase of the project, we incorrectly assumed that putting up the boxes had to be easier! In first deciding where to place them, the obvious choices were Cowichan Bay and Esquimalt Harbour. From there we had suggestions anywhere from Sooke to Fort St. John. Everyone always had "just the perfect spot" where the boxes should go. We narrowed it down to four other locations, in the time frame we had, based on past breeding records.


Our first location was Whiffen Spit in Sooke Basin. We were painting identification numbers on the boxes when on-lookers made comments such as: "Boy, what a great job you have, it must be nice to get paid for this," and, "Aren't martins' those animals they make fur coats out of?". After we explained to people what Purple Martins are, they would then tell us about how they have them in their yards all the time. One person told us that while she was growing up in Prince George she used to see hundreds. We had to assure her that we know of no records from Prince George and that Purple Martin's are very rare in British Columbia with only about 30 birds left.

In putting the 12-foot aluminum boat into the water we learned that parts of a beach that appear muddy make great disguises for quicksand. We ended up leaving our boots behind as a crowd of onlookers curiously watched as we pulled and pushed the boat to the ocean. We soon realized there was little space for us to sit, especially with a 30-foot ladder and 20 nest boxes in the boat. After managing to get into the boat, it became apparent that Darren had forgot to bring the plug. At least now we know that our nest boxes float (and aluminum ladders don't).

Once out in the middle of the basin (after fixing the plug) we spotted a good set of pilings to attach the first three boxes. With the boat tied, Darren then proceeded to climb 30 feet up the ladder. This was fine until curious boaters investigated what we were doing. It was especially "interesting" with the bigger boats because at that point Darren vertically travelled a good six feet up and then down as the wake hit our boat.

By late afternoon we had made our way to the end of the basin and found a nice shallow muddy bay with lots of pilings (ideal habitat for martins). We pulled the boat on shore and then started walking towards the pilings. We found that there are more than two spots in Sooke where one can find quicksand. Darren sank so deep in the mud that it appeared that Eric would lose both Darren and the ladder he was carrying. At about the same time we had a lesson in tidal flow when Eric noticed our boat floating away with the tide. Eric was now faced with the dilemma, save Darren and the ladder or save the boat. Realizing this was his only way home (and he could always buy another ladder), Eric pursued the boat. However, Darren felt much better after seeing Eric catch up to the boat in chest-deep water, knowing Eric was wearing only knee-deep boots.

After finishing up in Sooke, our next location was the infamous Purple Martin Pond. In speaking to the owner of the property, who had no idea the pond was so-named, we received permission to take in the boat and erect some boxes. Since everyone knew where this pond was, we assumed it would be a simple job that would only take a couple of hours. We spent an entire afternoon trying to find this pond, enduring such inconveniences as being chased by bulls and hiking a quarter mile over rocks and through dense underbrush to find that we couldn't even get the boat into



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the pond. When leaving for the evening, the owner kindly pointed out the road that we were supposed to have taken, which leads right to the pond.

Other areas we visited included the Inner Harbour, where we dodged float planes that were landing, the Gorge, where the engine overheated from all the weeds, and Esquimalt Harbour, where we had to balance on log booms.

Once all the nest boxes were put up we knew it had to get easier, or so we thought. We found that examining nests when birds are nesting can be quite frightening. Darren learned that martins have a tendency to dive down and strike one's body when one is in the vicinity of the nest box.

We ended up finding martins nesting in all sorts of locations. Most were in nest boxes but some pairs nested in a length of PVC pipe, in pilings over the water, and even on the side of a navy ship, in a porthole.

The finale to our season of martin study came after the breeding season when it was time to collect nests for study. All the nests were full of parasites and we were fortunate enough to discover what it feels like when mites and fleas crawl down your back. You get the most pleasant itchy feeling which only lasts for a week.

Some of the bad news that we discovered was that a Great Blue Heron may have had "rare" martin hors d'oeuvres one afternoon. It apparently perched on top of a piling, reached its head down and was eyeing up what was inside. Be on the lookout for a heron with braces since these nestlings were banded.

More bad news comes from Ladysmith where the town has decided to develop the area where martins are nesting. It is unfortunate but it seems that all the pilings where the martins nest will be removed. These are probably one of the few remaining martin colonies in all of North America where they do not rely on nest boxes for their survival. A similar process of removal was done in Campbell River which resulted in the abandonment of the area by martins.

Another area of concern is Esquimalt Harbour where two pairs of martins may also lose their homes. These houses are a little more elaborate than usual since they are located in portholes on an old decommissioned navy ship. Since this ship is being sold for approximately one million dollars, these birds currently hold the record for the most expensive "birdhouse".

All in all we had a great time and can't wait until the spring when we get to try it all over again while preparing the houses for next year's martins. All in a day's work for two crazy biologists who enjoy helping out when they can.

NOTE: Portions of this project were undertaken for a Purple Martin status report being prepared by Chris Siddle for the Wildlife Branch.

Purple Martin Nest Box Programme Summary - 1990

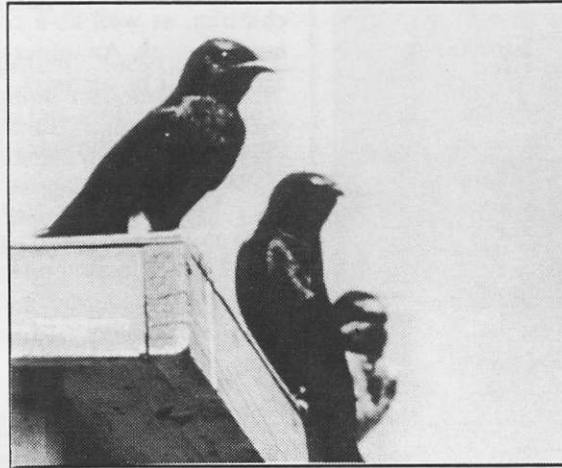
Only thirty confirmed nesting birds were observed in British Columbia this year, as follows (ASY = after second year, SY = second year):

a) Esquimalt Harbour: Four ASY males (one of these males was only seen once and there is a chance this bird travelled to Cowichan Bay or elsewhere); three ASY females; one SY** male; and, one SY female were reported. One of the ASY pairs was observed with 3+ young in a PVC pipe and another ASY pair with 2+ young in a nest box. The two other pairs were nesting in portholes on the side of a decommissioned navy vessel.

b) Cowichan Bay: Four ASY males, three ASY females, three SY males, and three SY females were observed, all nesting in nest boxes. Of the ASY pairs, we banded four young from each of the three nests.

Of the SY pairs, one was observed with 2+ young and the other with only two young.

c) Ladysmith Harbour: Four ASY males and four ASY females were observed. These pairs were nesting in pilings over the water. Five young were found in one nest.



Purple Martins. (Photo: D.F. Fraser)



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