

Suggestions to benefit Purple Martins, Bluebirds, & Tree Swallows



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Kathy Laine photo

As a long-time member of the PMCA, I read the Purple Martin Update regularly, and I am frequently impressed by the efforts of our members to pass on information and suggestions intended to benefit our native birds, and the people who care enough about them to try to help them. Kathy Laine, Mr. and Mrs. Ron Kingston, and I try to do that every June when we put on the "Purple Martin Field Day" in central Virginia, where we teach guests how to develop and maintain a successful Purple Martin colony, and how to assist other native cavity-nesting birds, such as bluebirds, Tree Swallows, kestrels, Barn Owls, etc.

At times when I read the letters and the articles in the Update I feel the urge to offer my own suggestions to address the recurring problems that must be solved as we try to provide safe nesting sites for Purple Martins and other native cavity-nesting birds. Many of my suggestions, derived from years of experience, are presented at the website <www.purplemartinfieldday.org>, which has links to articles published previously in the Update as well as "Lessons From the Purple Martin Field Days", a compilation of my suggestions to benefit Purple Martin colonies.

I was inspired to write this piece when I read Allen Jackson's article "Common Sense Bluebird Management" in the Winter 2013 Update, which provides much useful information on how to establish a nest box trail for bluebirds. That article prompted me to offer some additional thoughts regarding bluebirds and Tree Swallows, and various suggestions for solving problems at Purple Martin colonies.

Many readers of the Update may not find time to establish large-scale bluebird nest box trails, but we still interact with bluebirds and Tree Swallows, as well as with European Starlings, House (aka "English") Sparrows, House Wrens, etc., in our Purple Martin colonies, because all of those species of cavity-nesting birds are attracted to the nest-sites that martin gourds and martin houses offer. And since many of those bird species are likely to claim gourds or compartments intended for Purple Martins before the martins have returned from migration, the martin landlord must be ready to deal with them.

European Starling control: It is well known that the starling is an imported pest that is a deadly enemy of our native cavity-nesting birds, and if not controlled, starlings will destroy any martin colony. I have read in the Update that some martin colonies are still so bedeviled by starlings that the landlords resort to shooting them, which is not feasible in many locations and is always inconvenient, time-consuming, and noisy. Speaking as a landlord who has shot many dozens of starlings over the years, I believe there is a much better and easier way to remove all starlings from the vicinity of a martin colony. As I explain in the "Lessons" article at our website, once I had retro-fitted EVERY ONE of my martin gourds and houses with starling-resistant entrance holes (SREHs), and also set up the "S&S Controller Repeating Nest-box Trap" (purchased from the PMCA) near the martin colony site, every starling that visits my martin colony finds the martin gourds and houses inaccessible, and thus goes into the trap and is euthanized,

to the great benefit of all native birds in the area. (Very rarely a native bird enters the trap, and is released un-harmed.) Thus with relatively little work or inconvenience and with no shooting, starlings are no longer a problem for my martin colony.

House Sparrows must not be allowed to occupy martin housing if the martin colony is to survive and thrive, and sparrows can enter any entrance hole that would admit a Purple Martin. Fortunately, in my experience House Sparrows can be easily controlled and eliminated with the bait traps that are available from the PMCA catalog. I find that House Sparrows cannot resist cracked corn as bait, and I leave a few live sparrows in the holding cages of the traps to lure in any untrapped House Sparrows. Any native bird that enters the bait trap is released un-harmed.

Eastern Bluebirds and Tree Swallows are beautiful, beneficial, and legally-protected native birds that anyone who likes birds should be happy to have around, but which must be discouraged from trying to nest in martin housing. If one is trying to establish a new martin colony, it is all too likely that bluebirds and/or Tree Swallows will try to claim martin gourds or houses before the martins have returned from migration to investigate the martin housing. If martins do not have an established colony at that site, martins investigating gourds or houses are often driven off by bluebirds or Tree Swallows that have already claimed the martin housing.

To prevent that, I erected two nesting boxes suitable for bluebirds and Tree Swallows near (i.e., within about 30 feet) of my martin housing, and I paired those nest boxes so that they are about ten feet apart from one another. At



Opposite page: Guests at Field Day enjoy Lance Wood's martin colony. Above: Paired nestboxes for bluebirds and Tree Swallows, showing spacing of 10-15 feet. A bluebird house equipped with a Kingston stovepipe guard to protect against climbing predators. Photos by Ron Kingston. Eastern Bluebirds, photo by David Kinneer.



my martin colony site, for many years bluebirds have nested in one of the paired boxes, Tree Swallows have nested in the other, and they live side-by-side in harmony with one another and with the Purple Martins nesting nearby. Because the paired boxes are near one another, the territorial instincts of the bluebirds and Tree Swallows lead them to discourage any other bluebirds or Tree Swallows from nesting in the immediate vicinity of their boxes and the martin colony.



A gourd equipped with an elongated aluminum rain and predator guard. These long canopies provide protection against owls and hawks at Lance Wood's site. The gourd is sitting in a Gourd Vise, a helpful tool that originated with Louisiana landlord Lane Stout. (see Update 14(4)). Kathy Laine photo.

As Allen Jackson's recent bluebird article pointed out, when bluebirds and Tree Swallows both claim the same nesting box, they fight over it and sometimes destroy nests, eggs, and hatchlings in the process. I avoid that problem because I pair the 40 nest boxes for bluebirds and Tree Swallows that I maintain (that is, I erect the nest boxes between 5 and 15 feet apart from one another at widely-separated locations). The pairing of nest boxes practically eliminates bluebird/Tree Swallow conflicts.

I realize that some bluebird enthusiasts do not favor the pairing of nest boxes for bluebirds and Tree Swallows, and believe that unpaired boxes will maximize the production of bluebirds and minimize the production of Tree Swallows from bluebird trails. Because my goal is to maximize the production of both bluebirds and Tree Swallows, and to minimize the inter-species fighting that can take place over unpaired boxes, I have found that pairing nest boxes benefits both species. Of course, if one erects a third nest box near the paired boxes, that third box can be used to trap and euthanize any House Sparrows that have not entered the bait traps.

Entrance holes: The only size entrance hole that should be used for Eastern Bluebird/Tree Swallow nesting boxes is a round hole exactly 1-1/2 inches in diameter (or

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1-9/16 inches in diameter), because those hole sizes readily admit Eastern Bluebirds and Tree Swallows, but prevent European Starlings from entering the boxes. Peterson entrances, slot entrances, or larger-diameter round holes can admit starlings, which means death for nesting bluebirds or Tree Swallows.

Sometimes Carolina Chickadees try to nest in bluebird-type nest boxes, but the larger bluebirds and Tree Swallows bully and displace the diminutive chickadees. I tried to reserve some nesting boxes for Carolina Chickadees by using 1-1/4 diameter round entrance holes, but some Tree Swallows manage to squeeze through and claim the boxes. So this year I am reducing the entrance hole size for the Carolina Chickadee boxes to 1-1/8 inch diameter, hoping that will admit only Carolina Chickadees. (Note: Black-capped Chickadees are larger than Carolina Chickadees and thus need larger entrance holes.)

Pole guards: To protect my Purple Martins, bluebirds, Tree Swallows, etc. from the black rat snakes and raccoons that often attack their nests, every one of my martin poles and bluebird boxes is protected by a climbing animal barrier. In my opinion, the most reliable design for a pole guard to stop snakes, raccoons, and other climbing predators is either the original version or some variant of Ron Kingston's stove pipe guard (one version of which is sold by the PMCA). Properly fabricated and installed, the Kingston guard effectively blocks snakes as they wrap around and ascend the pipe or pole, by leading the snake to go up inside the stove pipe guard, only to discover that they cannot ascend past the top of the guard, which is made of hardware cloth or solid metal. If a snake or raccoon tries to go around the Kingston guard, they find that its large circumference and smooth sides make it almost impossible for them to hang on to the guard and ascend past it. Instructions for making and installing the Kingston guard can be found at <http://www.purplemartin.org/update/PredBaff.html>. I do not believe that a 4-inch diameter PVC pipe baffle cannot be relied on to stop climbing snakes, because snakes can wrap themselves around and climb that size PVC pipe.

Protecting Purple Martins from owls: I admire the elaborate wire cages that some martin landlords erect to protect their martin colonies from owl attacks. My martin gourds are not protected by such a cage, and my martin colony is in an area with lots of Great Horned Owls, Barred Owls, and screech owls, all of which raid martin colonies. Yet martins nesting in my gourds are never attacked by owls, because all of my gourds are hung so that they swing from front to back, and the entrance hole for each gourd is protected by an elongated rain and predator guard made of aluminum sheathing, glued to the surface of the gourd above the entrance hole with latex caulking. Those six-inch-long rain-and-predator-guards, plus the swinging action of the gourds themselves, have thwarted all attacks from owls and hawks, and are described and shown in the articles posted on the www.purplemartinfieldday.org website.

See the news page of this issue for more details on Purple Martin Field Day.