

# Purple Martin Summers in Greenbank — Since 2014

The 2015 Lagoon Point (Whidbey Island) Purple Martin Summer began in the fall of 2014 with my acquisition of a Starter Gourd Set from the *Purple Martin Conservation Association*; Bob Vierra and Dan Brock's construction of permanent removable piling caps on our shared dock; and the guys' herculean efforts to install the concrete-lined pole base on a piling to be ready for spring. Just in case the birds showed up again.

## Highlights of 2015 include:



Mary Hollen sporting her "I'm a Purple Martin Landlord" T-shirt with a framed Craig Johnson picture of her tenant behind her.

- Craig Johnson donates T-shirt art "I'm a Purple Martin Landlord" for recognizing people involved in the local recovery efforts.
- May 15: Purple Martins show up above Steelhead Drive from wintering in South America. Jim Stanton observes two birds sitting on Sheri Croll's piling cavity porch (porch built by Neil Kenworthy and installed by John Schmidt). Two days later I hear their beautiful songs overhead and see them on my dock piling. Yay!!
- May 3: Jim Stanton helps me place the pole sleeve and gourd rack on the pole base. Several Purple Martins watch me raise the gourd rack and



Mine!

Pictured right, adult birds singing from their perches as I lower the rack for a nest check.



- one gorgeous dark blue, fully adult male claims a gourd before it is all the way to the top of the pole. Score!
- Days go by while more Martins show up and try to get into the gourds but can't, then stand back and watch the starling that has taken over my piling cavity. Not supposed to nest over water but this one didn't read the rules, or the

pilings are too close to land. Eventually I sized the piling cavity opening small enough to prevent the starling while allowing Martins to enter. Gourd openings needed some shaving to accommodate Western Purple Martins (we have our own subspecies) who are a tiny bit larger



Male named, White Patch, with two females.

than the better known variety that summers in the rest of North America. And for whom the gourds were manufactured.

- I learn that there is a Western Purple Martin Working Group (WPMWG) by Bruce Cousens of Nanniamo, B.C. and of which the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife is a member. Participants in U.S. and Canada have been conducting a population demographics study for nearly 20 years. On May 9 a banded, fully adult female shows up; I take pictures of her bands via phoneskope, and learn that one of Bruce's volunteers banded her on Blackie Spit, south of Vancouver B.C., when she was a baby. I turn in her numbers to U.S. Geological Survey and get a "Certificate of Appreciation" to hang on my wall!
- More days go by as more fully adult and teenage Purple Martins show up to inspect and peek into the gourds and piling cavity. I get advice from all over and remove house sparrow nests from Bob's bird houses, then add dried grass to the gourds and piling cavity. I fiddle with the "starling resistant entrances" on the gourds and anxiously observe.

## Conservation Status:

Western Purple Martins (*progne subis arboricola*) are a Washington state candidate for listing and appear on the *Draft Species of Greatest Conservation Need*. U.S. Federal status has not been sought on account of earlier successful efforts to restore the Eastern Purple Martin that covers most of North America, plus the existence of an effective international recovery effort for the Western subspecies. British Columbia, Canada status was Red-listed (Threatened) until 2006 and is now Blue-listed (Special concern) thanks to efforts of the Western Purple Martin Working Group. —M.



- Bert Pack adjusts the opening on his piling cavity, but it is hard because he isn't there often enough when the Starlings are nesting. It takes trial and error. A starling takes over. Key concept: body size is very similar, starling to martin; leg length is longer on the starling and they can't crouch as low. Keep the porch level with the bottom of the opening and lower the header until the starling can't make it but the martin can.

- Bob Vierra modifies a large white plastic "rural-size" mailbox to become a Martin nest box with porches inside and out

that the birds can dig their claws into. Sizing the opening just barely big enough is critical to keep out Starlings.

- House Sparrows and Starlings, both alien invasives, plague the Purple Martins constantly and I'm afraid Martins won't enter the gourds or piling cavities. The Purples haven't yet evolved to resist these aggressive nest invaders which is why they need people to intervene. I learn to stop feeding bird seed in my yard and offer water instead. This results in fewer aliens and no loss of native songbirds.
- Phyllis Kind brings the Birding in Neighborhoods South group of Whidbey Auduboners to see the fun; Dan Pederson attends and takes pictures for his blog *Off The Rails*. Stan Kostka emails that there are Martins in gourds at Dines Point across Whidbey from me. I contact Dave Parent.
- Finally a month after arriving in the area Purple Martins begin actually entering the gourds, piling cavity and mailbox. Betsy Shapiro across the canal reports on their activities. They especially love the box and play in it extensively, adding their own materials to the dried grass put in by me. Craig and Joy Johnson arrive to photograph the birds and write about them. See their work at [Puget Sound Backyard Birds & Habitat](#).
- "I'm a Purple Martin Landlord" T-shirts arrive from the printer and are duly distributed to the participants. Tom Mueller of Bainbridge Island sends helpful advice and martin triplex plans.
- Two fully adult females decide on nests at my place: the first female to arrive takes a gourd and the banded female takes my piling cavity. The first one's mate is a beautiful blue-black fully adult male, while the banded female takes a "younger man" for her mate. At Sheri Croll's piling cavity a fully adult pair had begun nesting earlier. Purple Martins are now cheerfully tearing leaves out of my crabapple trees to use as nest lining and egg covers. More males than females gather leaves. Beautiful songs fill the air. I try to record them but my cell phone is too full of pictures.

- June 21: Nest check reveals one egg in my piling cavity and two eggs in the gourd nest! By now I know things can still go wrong, yet I sigh with relief. By June 28 the gourd has six



Gourd nest (above) and piling cavity nest (left), both with eggs.

eggs and the piling cavity five. I gently push the leaves aside to count. I install owl guards over the gourds and a pole collar, to prevent predation by Great Horned Owls, raccoons and/or river otters. Kitsap Audubon members and Stan Kostka, Secretary of the International Western Purple Martin Working Group advise me. Joe Siegrist and kindly members of the Purple Martin Conservation Forum pitch in with more advice.

- Takeaway: Western Purple Martins are not condominium-dwellers. They have accepted clusters of individual nest boxes or gourds; too widely spaced housing invites starling intrusion. Generally they want 30 or 40 feet space from human dwellings and structures.



Piling cavity hatchlings.

- July 12  
BABIES!!!



Gourd nest and piling cavity nest hold six and five naked hatchlings respectively, so new that their big eyes are visible through their closed eyelids. They look about four or five days old.

Gourd babies, pictured above and piling cavity babies, left.



Craig beautifully documents parent birds bringing insects and removing “fecal sacs”. Over succeeding weeks the babies fill out quickly, growing to be as big as adult birds by their projected 28-day fledge date. Adult birds learn to tolerate weekly nest checks,

singing from the perches as I lower and raise the gourd rack.

- Seven adult birds including three fully adult blue/black males perch above the gourds and on the piling cavities from time to time. Baby birds begin peeking out of their nests, then struggling to get out. Early morning on August



Fledglings in driving rain.

8, Sheri gets to watch as five babies fledge, one at a time, from her piling cavity. They wobble over to the next piling or take off and are rounded up by Mom who brings them back. Over at my place on August 11 — at an incredible 34 days old — a baby perches on my piling cavity porch, preening itself unconcernedly. Stan says they can go 40 days before fledging. I’m not there when mine first fly.

- August 15: My gourd and piling cavity nests are empty. The gourd smells bad after many very hot days, but both are surprisingly clean. I see the birds in the area, but by the next day they are gone. It has been even more exhausting than last year, but I think we can say that Lagoon Point has a colony of Western Purple Martins (I hope, I hope).
- I prepare this report and my report to the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (member of the Western Purple Martin Working Group): Three to seven nestlings fledged from Lagoon Point last year; **fourteen** fledged this year. Yay!

— Mary Hollen, Steelhead Drive, Greenbank 2015

## Purple Martins Return to Lagoon Point for Third Summer — 2016

So far the Purple Martin colony at Lagoon Point is the largest on Whidbey Island with nine active nests. Lagoon Point landlords are:

- Bert Pack
- Sheri Croll
- Neil Kenworthy and Anita Badri
- Bob Vierra
- Gary Hammer

Among our birds this year were three banded individuals. Western Purple Martins make a 6,000 mile fall trip to southwestern Brazil and back again in spring to breed only a few dozen miles from their birthplaces!

Most of these nests are near Steelhead Drive in Greenbank. Without human intervention the Western Purple Martin (*Progne subis arboricola*) would now be (human-caused) extinct.

I try to practice landlord behaviors that seem to me to be sustainable. During weekly nest checks I found a gourd nest

so soaked from a driving rainstorm that the eggs never hatched. After I replaced the wet mess with dry materials, new eggs did hatch and babies were raised.



Photo by Bert Pack

Young Purple Martins about to fledge.

Alien Starlings and House Sparrows aka English Sparrows continue to drive out native Purple Martins. House Sparrows are much smaller but far more aggressive. I watched a male house sparrow perch on the gourd array and display at the martins. At one nest check I found a gourd of babies that were hoarse from begging at the end of the day. At the next nest check they had starved to death. I believe the house sparrow was successful in driving off the parent birds, even though it

**Purple Martins, continued on page 4**

didn't take the nest itself.

Stop feeding seed to birds is my recommendation. Offer water instead and you'll get native birds in your yard and not attract so many aliens. For House Sparrow management — find their unique nests and pull them apart. For Starling management — find their nests and discard the bright blue eggs. (House Sparrows and Starlings are nonnative birds and thus not protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act.)

This colony started three years ago when a pair of Purple Martins found a cavity in a dock piling and raised a family. It seemed accidental but happened because of the Purple Martin's

perseverance and will to survive.

— Mary Hollen, 2016

## Western Martins Officially Named!

On November 4, 2016, Mary Hollen attended the annual meeting of the Western Purple Martin Working Group in Olympia, Washington and learned that the Western Purple Martin, *progne subis arboricola*, has received designation by the International Commission on Zoological Nomenclature (ICZN) as a recognized subspecies.

## Lagoon Point Purple Martins Fourth Summer (2017)

This year several more **Western Purple Martins** showed up and stayed for the season. I saw twenty flying around at one time and heard more nearby. However nesting efforts suffered from a lack of housing. We do have more landlords this year but need even more. My hope is that folks with meadows and wetlands south of Salmon Street will take advantage of Jay Adams' and Ruth Richards' boxes and put some up there.

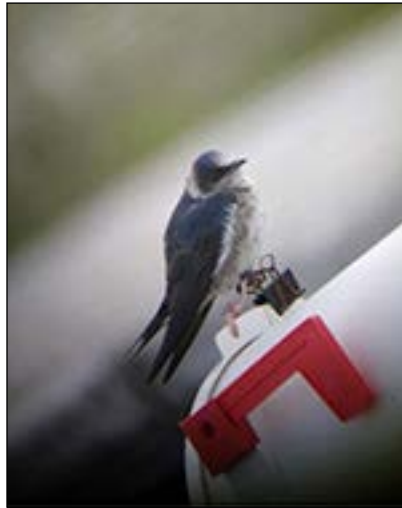


Photo by Mary Hollen

Purple Martin on mailbox-home.

We saw nesting pairs at all currently suitable locations in the neighborhood, but brood sizes were smaller numbering only one to four babies. Several baby deaths were observed. Knowledgeable experts attribute the small brood sizes and deaths to starvation on account of the unfavorable spring weather and scarcity of flying insects. In this colony we also believe that House Sparrows contributed to the decline. And of course many pairs never found nest sites at all.

Our force has grown to eight active landlords! Here are the season's results:

**Bert Pack:** Two gourds, one piling cavity, and one condo nests for a total of four active nests. Bert observed eleven babies in the nests.

**Sheri Croll:** Starlings took her piling cavity for a total of zero active nests

**Check back each fall for updates!**

Visit the Whidbey Audubon Society website, Fact Sheets

[www.whidbeyaudubon.org/factsheets.htm](http://www.whidbeyaudubon.org/factsheets.htm)

**Bob Vierra:** One birdhouse nest, fecal sac removal was observed, so there must have been at least one baby.

**Gary Hammer and Jeri Gregory:** one mailbox nest, two babies observed in the nest.

**Mary Hollen:** four gourds, one mailbox, and one piling cavity nest for a total of six active nests. A total of twenty one eggs and/or babies were observed in the nests.

**Neil Kenworthy and Anita Badri:** one piling cavity nest with at least two babies seen peeking out.

The colony supported thirteen active nests; an increase from last year's nine. A total of thirty-seven babies or eggs were observed in the nests at some point during the season. No fledgling count is given even though it is likely an increase over last year.

Another piece of good news: we are seeing purple martin males starting to defend their nests from the house sparrows. Purple martins have been too laid-back and that is changing.

Stan Kostka, Secretary of the Western Purple Martin Working Group and experienced martin field researcher, tells us that all of Whidbey Island is close enough to water for these birds to nest. All they need is appropriate nest sites.

— Mary Hollen

## Purple Martins on Crockett Lake

We put up four new boxes, made by us with the help of fellow birding friends, at Crockett Lake, bringing the total number of boxes there to 12. We've seen about nine Purple Martins in the area since then but are not aware of nesting activity.

We still have four boxes. If someone out there would like one or more to mount in some appropriate location, they may contact us at [protectionisland8.9@gmail.com](mailto:protectionisland8.9@gmail.com).

— Jay Adams

## Notes:

Photos are by Mary Hollen unless otherwise indicated.

Excerpts of these reports were published in *Shorelines*, September 2015 as "Second Purple Martin Summer in Greenbank" and October 2016 as "Purple Martins Return to Lagoon

Point for Third Summer,” September 2017 as “Lagoon Point Purple Martins Fourth Summer (2017)” and includes Crockett Lake habitat.

These issues are also archived on the Whidbey Audubon Society website.

Colored text is hyperlinked to a website when clicked.