

Michigan Purple Martin Friends

JUNE 2018 NEWSLETTER

Nest Checks

Why and how to safely monitor your colony

As a “purple martin landlord” you are responsible for making sure your housing is safe and secure for your tenants. From the outside, everything may seem okay – you see birds, they go in and out, so it’s a great house, right? You can never know for sure if your house is a haven or a death trap, unless you open it up and check the nests regularly.

Opening up your purple martin house and taking a peek inside during the nesting season is akin to a giant flipping open your roof and rearranging your furniture during Sunday dinner. It can seem daunting, intrusive, or even dangerous, but doing regular nest checks during the breeding season saves lives. Monitoring cavity-nesting birds is a rewarding and necessary experience. Although it doesn’t happen often, I have “rescued” nestlings from bad situations (ants, wasps, mites, rain, etc.) and I always know which boxes need to be modified, moved, or repaired for the next season. Even if a nest fails, by checking the nests (the scene of the crime!) I can see the evidence to help me understand why it failed, then I can take action to prevent the next nest from failing as well.

Step one is to make sure your housing is on a pole that you can lower and raise without all of the inhabitants tumbling out (no cantilevers!). Telescoping poles are a bit difficult to lower, but there are many pulley or winch systems that make adjusting your house a breeze. See the Resources section on the third page for a few places to purchase or build your own equipment.

Once your house can be safely lowered during the breeding season, number each cavity so you can keep clear records of each nest. If your housing rotates on the pole, when you raise the house again after checking it is important to



Keeping detailed records of nesting activity within each individual cavity is important for estimating the success of your colony. CC photo by US Fish and Wildlife Service.

make sure the house is facing the same direction it was when you lowered it. Purple martins will swoop down the same flight path as usual, so you need to make sure they arrive at the correct doorstep.

How frequently do you need to check? Slowly lower the housing every 4 – 7 days for best results. This timeframe is ideal because it isn’t too frequent that the birds will abandon nest, yet it’s frequent enough that you can piece together a clear picture of what happens inside the housing. Once the housing is down, you should move swiftly to limit the amount of time the housing is down. Many purple martin parents will wait patiently nearby while you conduct a check, then will return quickly after your check is complete.

What are you looking for during a check? First, you are gathering nesting information such as: when eggs are laid, how many eggs, how many chicks hatch, etc. This is ultimately used to estimate how many chicks survive, or, more generally, how successful your house is.

Second, you are looking for any evidence of parasites, water damage, invasive species, or predator activity. Solutions for these issues are addressed in the Nest Check Guide listed in the References on the next page.

If you start checking the nests, estimating the age of the chicks is very important for keeping them safe during later nest checks. Each of the nests will hatch at a different date, with some chicks ready to fledge before others. When the chicks get close to fledging (22 days or older) they may jump out of the nest during a nest check. You can prevent this by blocking the opening of cavities containing older chicks with a cup attached to a long string. After the nest check is complete and you raise the house again, allow a few minutes for these older chicks to settle down, then pull the string to remove the cup. It is very important to keep track of how old the chicks are so you can prevent “jumpers” who may not survive once out of the nest. If you do get a “jumper,” you can either return the chick to its nest (if you know for sure where it hatched) or you can use a tray with a lip (e.g. a feeding tray) with a tent overtop to keep the chick safely off the ground for a few days. The parents will feed it normally.



Checking nests is an engaging, hands-on experience that is great for responsible children and teens. Invite your kids, grandkids, nieces and nephews, or the local scout clubs to come out and learn about Purple Martins. You could spark a lifelong interest in nature and conservation.

CC photo by Oakley Originals.

For more details and troubleshooting specific situations, please read the resources listed on the next page. This was a summary to highlight a few important things to keep in mind as you get started with nest checks.

Conducting nest checks may still seem daunting, but as long as you keep the birds' safety in mind you will learn as you go. Most days will be uneventful and uplifting as you take notes on the nesting activity within your housing. If you have any questions at all, please reach out to the wonderful members of the Facebook group (Michigan Purple Martin Friends), Michigan Audubon, or the Purple Martin Conservation Association.



An in-flight shot of a Purple Martin in action. These aerial insectivores provide all-natural, authentic pest removal service.

Photo by Josh Haas, Glances at Nature

— Nest Check Resources —

Nest Check Information

[Nest check guide](#) from the Purple Martin Conservation Association

[How and why to do nest replacements](#) (Warning: graphic photo on the first page!) is a very thorough look at identifying nest parasites and safely replacing infested or rain-soaked nesting material. These are two issues that can kill nestlings without intervention.

Keep clear records by using PMCA's [nest check data sheet](#), then send a copy of this data to PMCA to contribute to their purple martin research. **PMCA receives very few monitoring records from Michigan: just 4 records in 2016 and 5 in 2017.** Please help researchers better understand Michigan's purple martin population by monitoring and sharing your experience. PMCA's website has a wealth of information. Start with their page on [nest checks](#) and branch out from there!

www.nestwatch.org from Cornell Lab of Ornithology has a wealth of information on conducting nest checks for all nesting birds.

The [Michigan Bluebird Society](#) are advocates of nest checks and monitoring as well.

Video

Oklahoma Gardening made a nice [walkthrough video](#) about nest checks. If you're more of a visual person, check this out! This video is part of a purple martin management series.

Poles & Pulleys

The Purple Martin Conservation Association Shop has poles and fittings for several styles of housing. [Visit the Shop page](#) and click "Houses" on the left-hand side to see the different models and accessories.

[Steel pole and pulley system](#) from S & K (holds up to 20 pounds).

The Purple Martin Place has an entire section devoted to [poles and accessories](#).

If you have a T-14, here is a detailed description of [a DIY mount for fitting a T-14 to a metal pole](#). You can also purchase [a mounting kit from PMCA](#).

Tech-savvy Nest Monitoring: Live-streaming footage from within the nest



The Purple Martin Conservation Association has a nest camera that is live-streaming on YouTube. The four eggs are due to hatch around June 18th. The male Purple Martin continues to bring green leaves and will frequently swap places with the female to give her a break. Once, the male appeared to try and nestle a green leaf into the female's back. She promptly fixed it after he left! In the screen shot here, you can see he managed to place a leaf on his own head. It is a real treat to listen and watch this pair interact.

Watch the action live: [PMCA's YouTube Live Stream](#)

Purple Martin

Fun



Fact

An old wives' tale says that bird parents will abandon a baby bird if they smell human scent on it. Nearly all birds have a terrible sense of smell (one exception is the Turkey Vulture). If nestlings are in danger, either because they have fallen out of the nest or because there are parasites in the nest, it is okay to handle the birds and get them safely out of harms way. Always use caution and act quickly (no selfies with the chicks!). CC photo by Oakley Originals

Greetings, fellow Purple Martin enthusiasts! This is the second in a series of seasonal, fun, informative newsletters about Michigan Purple Martins and the Michiganders who care for them. We welcome your feedback as we begin this new project. If there is a topic you would like to see included, a question you would like to submit, or photos you would like to share, please send your thoughts to: RRoake@michiganaudubon.org.

We hope you've enjoyed this issue!

Join the Michigan Purple Martin Friends on Facebook:
Share photos, ask questions, join the flock!

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/MichiganPUMA/>

If you have housing up for Purple Martins, be sure to register your colony at:

www.michiganaudubon.org/bfc/PUMA

This newsletter was produced by Michigan Audubon.



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May 2018

Upcoming Events

Connie Spotts' Purple Martin Potluck

Join veteran Purple Martin landlord Connie Spotts and Jackson Audubon for a summer potluck celebration! This event is hosted at the home of Jackson Audubon Society President Connie Spotts on Crispell Lake at Shady Acres Campground. Come see Connie's thriving Purple Martin colony along with beautiful pollinator gardens and nest boxes for many other birds. The fun begins at 11:00 a.m.!

The address is:
2023 Crispell Rd.w
Clark Lake, MI 49234

Call Connie for questions or directions at
517-230-2707.