

Michigan Purple Martin Friends

JULY 2018 NEWSLETTER

Nest Changes

How and why to perform nest changes

It is the time of summer where many nests are full of young Purple Martins, some already have fledged and others are getting close. Here is something to keep in mind to help with successful, healthy young Purple Martins (or for next year if your young of the year are already out of the nest!): performing a nest change.

Nest changes, done to control nest parasites, can increase the health of your colony with improving survival and fledging rates. In the 1980s, Purple Martin Conservation Association found that in martin nests with parasites, only 44% of nestlings survived to fledge successfully, whereas in nests without parasites, 84% of nestlings fledged successfully. So how can we provide a clean nest for our martins? We do not want to use pesticides, which besides being illegal can also harm nestlings, so instead we manually change out a nest. [Purple Martin Conservation Association](#) has a great article with lots of helpful information on nest changes and parasites – but beware of a photo on the front page of a martin nestling with an extreme amount of blowfly larvae on the front page – you may not want to look if you are squeamish!

What constitutes a nest change? You essentially are clearing out the nest material (and parasites such as blowfly larvae, mites, martin fleas, or swallow bugs – none of which will harm humans!) and replacing it with fresh, clean material. Easy, right? Yes! And you don't need to be afraid of harming the nestlings or "messing up". Purple Martins will not abandon their nests or young if you touch the young.



Purple Martin nestlings in a freshly changed nest.

Photo by Michigan Audubon.

6 simple steps to follow for a nest change:

- 1) First, gather your equipment and materials:
 - Deep, 5-gallon bucket
 - Wet wipes or soapy water and paper towels
 - Putty knife to scrape out nest debris
 - A container for the old nest material
 - Cedar wood shavings (NOT sawdust!)
 - Dry white pine needles (you can gather these from under a white pine tree)
 - Fresh green leaves (from maple, elm, birch, or other tree/shrub with "soft" leaves)
- 2) Remove nestlings from their cavity and place into the deep bucket with wood shavings at the bottom. You can cover the bucket with a small towel to keep sun off the nestlings while they are inside. To keep the bucket clean (if you are changing multiple nests), allow each nestling to "poop" after you remove it from its nest cavity, prior to placing it in the bucket.
- 3) Reach into the gourd cavity or into the house compartment and pull out the entire nest.

You can use a putty scraper here to scrape blowfly maggots from corners of a compartment.

4) With wet wipes or a wet/soapy paper towel or rag, wipe the cavity walls and floor. You don't need to seek out every single nest mite, just do the best that you can within a minute or so. Dry well with paper towels.

5) Once the old nest and parasites have been removed, place 1-3 handfuls of soft wood shavings (cedar shavings work well) into the cavity or compartment, then spread white pine needles into the cavity – spread evenly across the bottom. Create a small depression in the needles or wood shavings, line with a small handful of green leaves. *Do NOT use sawdust as it soaks up moisture and will create an uncomfortable nest for the nestlings.

6) Place nestlings into a huddle within the clean nest after checking each one over for attached blowfly maggots. If you find any, they can be gently removed by brushing them off with your finger. Don't forget to look under the wings!

7) Dispose of removed nests when you are finished.



Performing nest changes can dramatically improve the health and fledging success rates for a Purple Martin colony. Here, nestlings (18 days old) await a fresh nest.

Photo by Michigan Audubon.

For more details about performing nest changes, please read the resources listed on the next page. This brief summary of nest change steps is a place to get you started with this next stage of being a proactive martin landlord.

Just at nest checks may have seemed daunting to you once, conducting a nest replacement may be even more so. But just as with nest checks, so long as you keep the birds' safety in mind, you will keep learning and become more confident as you go. If you have any questions at all, please reach out to the Facebook group ([Michigan Purple Martin Friends](#)), [Michigan Audubon](#), or the [Purple Martin Conservation Association](#).



Purple Martin nestlings prior to a nest change. This nest had loads of blowfly larvae and other parasites!

****Note:** Nest replacements are not recommended for nestlings younger than 10 days old. Also avoid checking the nest after 22 days to prevent early fledging from the extra disturbance.

LANDLORD CHATTER

AN INTERVIEW WITH PENNY BRISCOE

Penny Briscoe has been a Purple Martin landlord since 1986, at Barton Lake in southwest Michigan (Vicksburg area). Penny took the initiative to learn how to best help with Purple Martin conservation as an active landlord, after a summer of extreme weather caused many nestlings to die in their nests. She and her husband had a high number of 53 nest cavities, but have since reduced the number to 28 cavities, all gourds, to be better able to properly manage the colony – resulting in consistently higher fledging rates. Penny keeps careful statistics, provides supplemental food as needed, and performs nest changes.

With the extreme heat, have you seen any Purple Martin nestlings fledge early (“jumpers”)? How you have helped these new fledglings?

“The heat is not a problem causing jumpers so much as are the mites, blowfly larvae, and other parasites. However, one year I made heat shields of foam board and put them over my nest cavities. There were several straight days in the high 90s and 100s a few years ago. And often in places like Texas the landlords make misters to lightly shower their housing during very hot periods. The best thing to do to keep jumpers to a minimum is to keep the nests dry and free of parasites.

If birds are fledging and fail to stay in the air on their first attempt to leave the nest, they must be discovered by a person in order to survive because the parents will not go to the ground to help them. To Purple Martins, the ground is a very dangerous place. Place the bird in a shelter box up high near the colony housing. If the bird is very wet because it fell in the water or was rained on, warm it in a towel and then leave in a covered bucket on pine needles until feathers are dry. Then put it in the shelter box covered with a towel for several minutes. I use a tray on my 4-tray feeding apparatus from Purple Martin Conservation Association. When the bird settles down, carefully remove the towel [while] raising the platform with the shelter box. The parents will feed it and encourage it to fly [again]. You might want to watch to be sure it was successful.”

“It’s hard to explain, but I can say, simply, that I love them all quite deeply, and while I am relieved somewhat when the season is over, I feel a great sadness come over me. The sky at our house is now so still and quiet – and eerily void of the bustle of their busy lives.”

– Penny Briscoe

What has been your proudest Purple Martin moment?

“The happiest moments are every year when I see the first bird or two return in the spring. I feel a great sense of joy knowing I once more am able to hear that distinctive, cheerful song from the air. My most satisfying moments are the end of every season when I consider all my efforts to assist my beloved summer visitors and know it has been a successful season for them.”

Have you had an issue with blowfly larvae or other nest parasites? Do you have advice for someone new to doing a nest replacement?

“The best defense is nest changes at least once [during] the season. I do regular nest checks and change the nest if I see parasites or the nest is wet...I always do nest changes once while chicks are in the nest, at about 15–18 days old. I use a handful of cedar shavings and a nice bed of white pine needles, followed by fresh green leaves. Jumpers that left the nest early should be placed back in the nest they came from.”

Resources

Nest Change (Replacement) Information

[Nest replacement guide](#) from the Purple Martin Conservation Association. (Warning: graphic photo on the first page!) This is a thorough look at identifying nest parasites and safely replacing infested or rain-soaked nesting material, two issues that can kill nestlings without intervention.

A good example of a nest change video (along with nestling banding by PMCA staff with a federal permit): [Nestling banding and nest replacement](#). Go to approximately 6:25 into the video to hear why we should do nest replacements!

Purple Martin

Fun



Fact

A favorite food item of Purple Martins, dragonflies can be commonly seen around wetlands, lake shores, and meadows. Next time you are out, take a look around to see how many different colors and sizes of dragonflies and damselflies you can find! Observe what the martin adults are bringing to the gourds or houses – can you see some dragonfly wings?

Photo by Michiana Audubon member Karen Brown.

Greetings, fellow Purple Martin enthusiasts! This is the third in a series of seasonal, fun, infomative 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: LRowse@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

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A few more nest change tips!

- Wear long sleeves and pants and consider wearing a dust mask especially if you are replacing many nests, as it can be dusty!
- Nest mites and feather lice can crawl onto you, but they are not harmful to humans (only annoying!).
- Never attempt to do more than one nest change at a time – you don't want to mix up which nestlings came from which nest! Aim for about 3-5 minutes per nest.
- Avoid changing a nest on days with poor weather; the best time of day is the afternoon.



Check out our recent [Facebook post](#) about a nest change we did at one of our Lake Lansing colonies!

Upcoming Events

Michigan Audubon Seminar Series: Safe Passage and Window Collisions with Heidi Trudell
August 13 | 7-8 p.m.

Hundreds of millions of healthy birds are killed each year when they collide with glass at residences and office buildings. This is a serious problem. Bird populations are facing steep declines, and aside from habitat loss and cats, glass is the leading cause of death. Join Heidi in exploring the myriad solutions that can save birds, starting right at home.

Seminars are free and open to the public, at the Michigan Audubon office located at 2310 Science Parkway, Suite 200, Okemos MI, 48864.

<https://www.michiganaudubon.org/learn/seminar-series/>