

Green Scene: A Successful Summer for Purple Martins?

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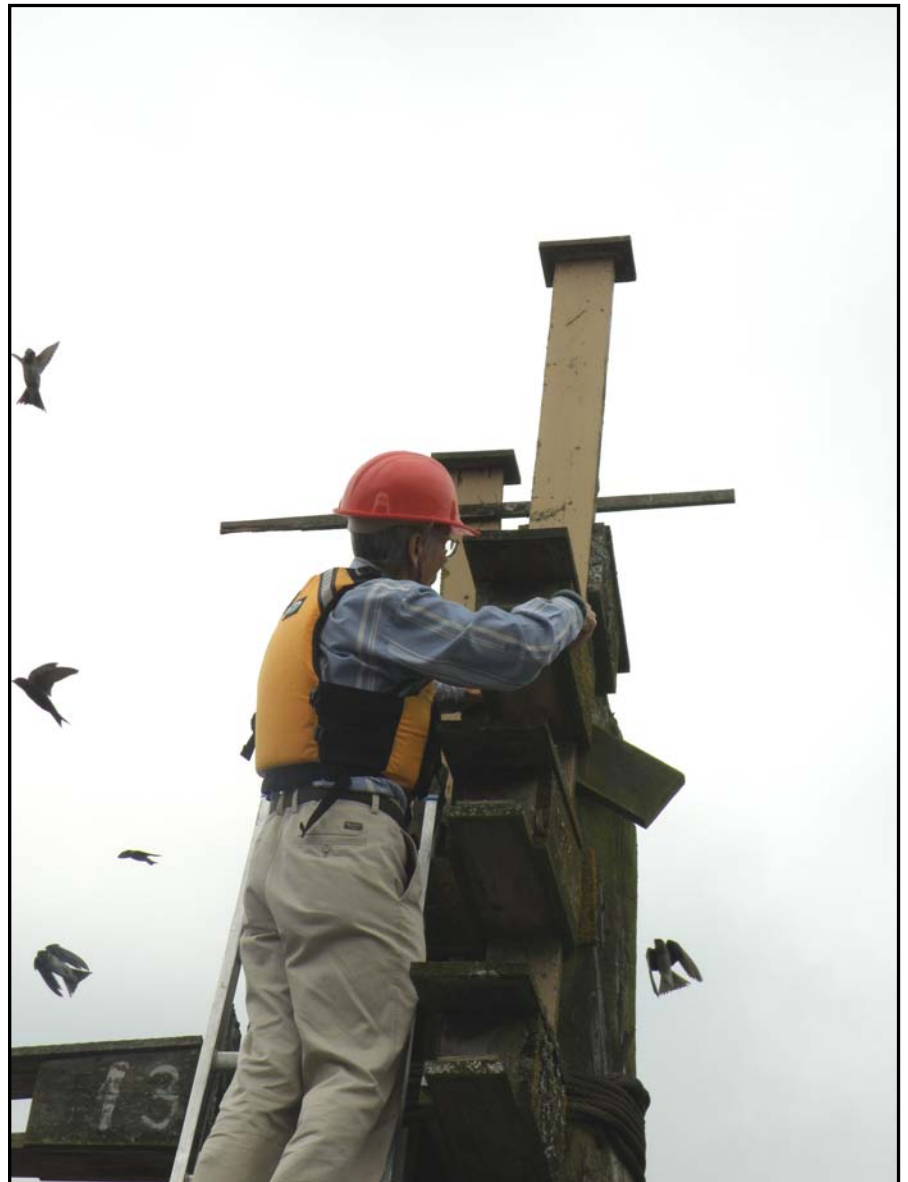
Alas, summer is quickly drawing to a close. Families of birds are now gathering into flocks and summer blossoms are fading fast. I hope you got a sufficient dose of sunshine to see you through the grey months which lie ahead and that your summer had many memorable and happy times.

From a tall ladder, Kiyoshi Takahashi returns banded juvenile martins to their nest box while parent birds circle and keep a watchful eye.

Robyn Worcester photo..

Although my summer included the exciting sighting of new bird species (for me), a boreal chickadee, and an awesome view of a grizzly bear close to the Elk River, my most memorable day this summer was one spent in the geographical heart of Port Moody in early August. That was when I joined a group of wonderful volunteers to spend the better part of day on Captain Rod MacVicar's boat to monitor and band juvenile purple martins in Burrard Inlet.

Purple martins, the largest member of the swallow family, are a species at risk. Every spring, they undertake incredibly long migrations from Brazil to nest in coastal areas of southern BC. Unlike the eastern subspecies of martins which nest in backyards in martin "condos", the west coast purple martins nest over water. In 1985, only five pairs of nesting purple martins were recorded in BC. Their diminishing numbers were due to loss of nesting habitat plus competition for that habitat from starlings. While martins had once nested in tree cavities in flooded areas, diking and human development in waterfront areas had essentially eliminated all such nesting sites. In Port Moody, the last purple martin was sighted in 1976.



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successful with martins returning to nest at Maplewood in North Vancouver in 1994 followed by a single nesting pair at Rocky Point in 1996. Unfortunately, budget cutbacks eliminated provincial involvement, but the nest box program has been continued by a number of dedicated volunteers (for more information, see www.georgiabasin.ca/puma.htm).

In Port Moody, the purple martin project has been under the careful guidance of Kiyoshi Takahashi for many years. For his outstanding volunteer work, Takahashi has received awards from the City of Port Moody, the Georgia Basin Stewardship Program and BC Nature. In addition to many hours spent monitoring nest box use by purple martins, Takahashi has designed and installed nest boxes with coverings which prevent the boxes from being used by starlings. He has also installed nest boxes at some fresh water sites in hopes of encouraging martins to return to these sites as well. While the purple martin population of BC has increased tremendously since 1985, their continued presence in BC remains very much dependent on the provision of nest boxes by volunteers plus appropriate weather during the nesting period.

Banding juvenile martins allows vital information to be gathered on their migration pathways, wintering sites and lifespan, etc. In 2007 at Rocky Point, the number of juveniles banded reached a peak of 71 from a total of 27 occupied nest boxes. However, the cold and wet springs of recent years have created hard times for many nesting birds. Hopefully, this is not a permanent change in our weather patterns. A delay in the arrival of hot weather delays the appearance of insects which most birds feed to their young so nests are abandoned or young birds starve. Throughout 2008-2010, only 7 martin nest boxes at Rocky Point produced nestlings old enough to band with an average total production of only 28 nestlings each year. This year, Takahashi decided to delay the banding slightly because of the late start of warm weather. This summer, volunteers were delighted to discover 65 nestlings old enough for banding from a total of 16 occupied nest boxes.

As I held those tiny and almost featherless bodies of juvenile martins in my hand, it seemed impossible they would be ready for an 11,000 km migration in only a few weeks time. However, their parents were constantly bringing nutritious meals of fat dragonflies to their nests. Foraging almost to the point of exhaustion, these birds were doing all they possibly could to ensure their young would survive. We know that nature is resilient and it was certainly exemplified by the behavior of these dedicated parents. Surely, this is an example we can all learn from – to do all that we can possibly do in our endeavors, to maintain our optimism and never give up.