



Fig. 1

*Louise Chambers
Purple Martin Conservation Association*

JOHN BARROW: THE PMCA'S 2008 LANDLORD OF THE YEAR

The PMCA is very pleased to honor John Barrow of Corpus Christi, Texas, as its 2008 Landlord of the Year. As with all his predecessors, a focus on education, a commitment to help others, and a passionate interest in Purple Martins and their future, mark John as highly deserving of this award.

John presently maintains two colonies of 40+ pairs, doing weekly nest checks, keeping records, reporting scout dates and posting unique spring migration updates on the PMCA's online Forum. He mentors numerous sites in Port O'Connor, Corpus Christi, and nearby communities. Besides martins, he hosts Chimney Swifts, Golden-fronted Woodpeckers, and Brown-crested Flycatchers. Black-chinned Hummingbirds have nested in his urban yard as well as Couch's Kingbirds. His weekend location on Matagorda Bay offers an incredible window into migration, both spring and fall, and some of the most spectacular spring arrivals occur there. Raised in San Antonio, John spent a lot of time on his grandparent's ranch south of the city. His college summers were spent in Wyoming, working for the Park Service and Forest Service as a park ranger and forest ranger, patrolling 250,000 acres of the Teton wilderness area on horseback, further increasing his appreciation for nature. Armed with a law degree from Baylor University, he's worked as an attorney ever since, and is also a municipal judge for the city of Portland, TX. Hunting, and later fishing, were priorities for many years, along with raising his sons Luke and Justin.

LANDLORD HISTORY

After many years of fishing, especially for tarpon, John tired of cleaning boats and fish. His interest shifted to birds, and

to Purple Martins in particular. A friend had a few martin houses and John decided to put one up at his weekend home in Port O'Connor, TX, a small town of 800 people on the Gulf Coast south of Houston. He put up an unmanageable aluminum house, too close to the pine trees in his back yard, and attracted starlings, but didn't know the difference until his friend broke the news to him. John learned to control the starlings and moved the houses to an open area—next year, he attracted martins. Somewhere along the way, he found the PMCA and started reading and learning more about martins. He upgraded to better houses and added natural gourds, and installed martin housing at his home in Corpus Christi as well. Today, over 15 years later, instead of cleaning boats, he cleans out gourds and houses.

His housing of choice remains natural gourds and Lonestar aluminum houses. He helped Lonestar design their add-a-rack for hanging gourds below the houses. He found that he enjoyed working on natural gourds during the non-martin months, and experimented with a variety of sizes, shapes, hanging methods, and entrances. Large gourds hung horizontally remain popular with John and his martins. He has tried many types of starling-resistant entrances and today uses crescents, Excluders and variations of Excluders with excellent results. House Sparrows are controlled with traps and shooting. He uses removable stovepipe guards, with the additional of netting above them in areas where snakes are abundant and Texas-sized.

John may have been the first landlord in TX to practice supplemental feeding and promote it to others. He has fed the martins every year—by necessity—since 2001 or 2002. The drought experienced in the 2008 nesting season was

Fig. 1. John Barrow with two of his favorite gourds. Artist Sarah Thompson won first place in the KY gourd show with the gourd on the left, and the gourd on the right was a gift made for Barrow by PA gourd artist, the late Dorothy Hecker. **Fig. 2.** During spring migration in 2007, bad weather forced 1000s of martins to land along the Texas coast to wait out several days of cold, rainy weather. Not only was the platform feeder covered with birds, they covered gourd racks and houses, and crammed into occupied gourds. **Fig. 3.** One of John's Lonestar gourd racks in Port O'Connor. John favors natural gourds and spends winter months preparing them. He uses primarily stalling-resistant entrances. **Fig. 4.** Curious martins wonder about their upstairs and downstairs neighbors. Horizontal gourds are very popular at John's sites, offering safe roomy quarters.

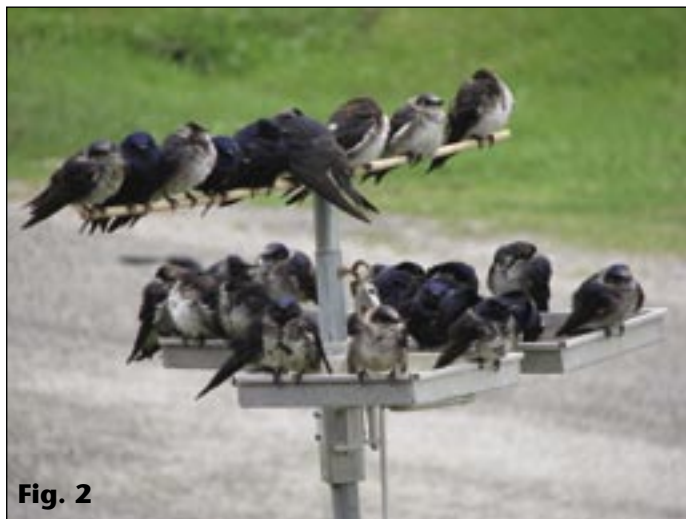


Fig. 2

the first time he found the martins needing prolonged help. He fed 1000 or more crickets daily for 6-8 weeks to help reduce the loss of nestling martins.

John's interest in martins has grown over the years from managing his own site, to helping others attract and learn to manage their own colonies, to securing the martins' future by reaching children. Wondering what would happen to the martins after he's gone—the martins at his own colony sites, and martins everywhere, led him to write



Fig. 3

an article for the *Update*, Last Testament to the Purple Martin, that urges landlords to make martins a priority in their lives not just for the present but for the future as well. In it, he wrote,

"What will happen when my martins return and I am no longer here? I feel very blessed to have had Purple Martins as part of my life-style for a number of years and wish that relationship would

last forever—that there would always be another season for me to anxiously await their return, but I know that it will not always happen. Someday, and I know not when, the Purple Martins will return, cheerfully gurgling around my house, and I will no longer be here." That thought continues to guide his actions, spurring him to mentor others and particularly, to work at helping children connect with nature and Purple Martins.

MENTORING

A good way to ensure a brighter future for Purple Martins is to mentor others. Over the years John has worked to help dozens of landlords along the south Texas coast, doing everything from choosing locations and digging holes, to teaching them how to control House Sparrows, feed martins, do nest checks and keep good records. He urges them to become PMCA members, too, often getting them started with a gift membership. He loans out equipment, including gourds, traps, and on occasion entire housing systems. He is on call to his mentees whenever they have a question or need help. Further from home, John mentors via phone calls, emails and through the PMCA's online Forum.

One of his goals as a mentor was to see Port O'Connor have at least ten colonies of 20 pairs. He has achieved better



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

than that, thanks to the high level of interest and a group of hard-working landlords, including Ed Adams, Kees Verheul, Adrian & Tommy Hans, Gary Sizenbach, the late Drew Jenkins, Bob Gosnell and Petra Hockey, to name just a few. John helped establish many new sites and rescued some sites that were not thriving through use of better housing and good management. If a landlord moves away, John does his best to move housing to new sites. Two newly established sites just south of Port O'Connor nearly filled their first year, turning out some of the best fledge rates achieved in this year of severe drought—83% and 96%.

BANDING PURPLE MARTINS

John's dedication to learning more about martins in Texas expanded into banding in 2003, when he started working with TX Parks & Wildlife's Dr. Brent Ortego, leader of a TX banding team that has banded over 200,000 birds of 362 species since its start in 1974. With Brent's assistance, John was able to recruit a few more landlords for training, and today the area covered by this cooperative group reaches from Buckholts TX, north of Austin, down through San Antonio and Corpus Christi. Colonies around Kyle, Buda, Seguin, and Georgetown have been banded as well. The team has banded a total of almost 6000 martins. Data collected over the following years may offer an interesting look at returns and survivorship at southern colonies, to compare with what's been observed in north. And of course, one of the major benefits of being part of a martin-banding project in Texas is that days of banding are usually accompanied by barbecue—brisket, sausage, and stuffed jalapenos!

John puts in a good amount of time reading bands in Corpus Christi and Port O'Connor, maintaining a database of resighted birds, about 200 from the first four years. One banded subadult male returned to its natal cavity and fought to claim it, beat up an adult male, and suavely offered a cigarette butt it had picked up to an adult female—he had a mate the next day, and raised a family in his natal cavity.

Along with Seguin landlord Tony Frederickson, John is working to document the existence of confirmed second broods. John installed several nest cams in 2007 and got a



Fig. 6



Fig. 7

Fig 5. John instructs landlord Mike McCormick in how bands will be applied. **Fig. 6.** A pair of cowboy boots John converted into unique, Texas-style housing by adding pull-out nest tubes and SREH's. **Fig 7.** A clutch of five Golden-fronted Woodpecker nestlings ready for banding. They nest in a wooden nestbox in John's backyard in Corpus Christi.

second brood on camera but the eggs did not hatch. The first brood young kept returning at night even after second clutch of eggs was laid, until one night the male blocked the entrance to keep them out.

Banding has created some wonderful opportunities to share Purple Martins with children of all ages. No Barrow banding session seems to take place without a group of children, all getting a chance to see the birds up close and maybe to hold one briefly. What a great way to get kids hooked on birds and conservation.

PUBLIC EDUCATION & SCHOOLS

John has hosted an annual visit by the 5th grade class (80-90 students each year) from next-door Sanders Elementary School since 2003. He participates in their annual science fair and gives a presentation at the school each spring, followed by a visit to his yard. A system is lowered and access caps are removed from selected gourds so kids can see eggs and babies of varying ages. The highlight of the visit is banding of nestling martins and woodpeckers. The Sanders School group has since started a nature club that goes on field trips to see the area's birding highlights, including whooping cranes, fall hawk migration and hummingbird migration events, and to visit the Word Birding Center in the Rio Grande Valley. John sponsors some of the trips, and works with teachers and administrators at the school in hopes of incorporating bird studies into curriculum for all Corpus Christi schools.

WRITING FOR THE UPDATE & AREA NEWSPAPERS

John contributed articles on preparing natural gourds and installing nest cams to the *Update*, in addition to articles on second broods in Texas, Hurricane Claudette, and Last Testament, which talks about what we can do to ensure the



Fig. 8

Fig. 8. Purple Martins cover power lines in Corpus Christi in midsummer. It's location on the Gulf Coast makes Corpus Christi a major migratory stopover site for a variety of birds, and it's won the title of Birdiest City in North America six years in a row.

future of Purple Martins. John has written articles about martins for area newspapers, often highlighting well-known martin enthusiasts in those communities such as late radio personality Charlie Lewis in Victoria TX, and the late political columnist Maury Maverick in San Antonio. He has given talks on martins for county wildlife agencies, and the Texas Ornithological Society.

MIGRATION ON THE TEXAS COAST

John's reports on the PMCA Forum are a chance for landlords all over the continent to share in the excitement of

watching for what might be the first martins of the year for Texas, and later, massive numbers of returning martins and swallows that have journeyed over the Gulf. At the end of the season, roosts move south along the Texas coast, so John is well placed to welcome the martins back and later wish them bon voyage.

Spring migration along the TX coast seems to be a unique experience – just before sunset, a group of 80-100 martins may suddenly arrive and cover the housing at Port O'Connor. Or seemingly endless waves of Barn Swallows martins, and other swallow species may fly over for an hour before dark. His reports are often the only coastal migration reports the PMCA receives. Easter weekend of 2007, 100 or so migrants dropped down to stay for 3-4 days of rainy, cold weather, crowding the colony members already present. Over 6500 crickets & mealworms were fed during that period, and a dozen grounded martins were cared for and released.

From putting up his first martin house in Port O'Connor years ago, John's dedication to helping martins thrive has grown into a network of friendships that reach far outside of Texas. While the focal point of his work is in south Texas, he does his best to help and encourage landlords throughout the martins' breeding range. He has supplied gourds to a school site in North Carolina, and supports projects in various parts of the country with donations or by supplying equipment. The martins could not have a better friend and supporter.

Thank you John, for all that you do and have done for Purple Martins and Purple Martin landlords. We are grateful for your service to others. On behalf of the members, staff and Board of the PMCA it is our privilege to have you as the PMCA's 13th Landlord of the Year.



John Barrow, the Purple Martin Man, is what the students at Sanders Elementary call him. John began sharing his knowledge and love for martins with the 3rd grade children. He brought us posters, books, and gourds. He helped the students notice and begin to look forward to seeing the martins every year when the birds returned to his houses and gourds adjoining the Sanders playground. The 2nd grade students would come into 3rd grade classroom, asking me, "And can we go see the martins this year?" His patient, kind way of explaining the birds to the students made him their favorite visitor.

When I began teaching the 5th grade students, John and I were very excited that the more mature students would be able to do a more in-depth study of the martins. With John's support and knowledge, we were able to start a Nature Club, sponsored by teacher Maria Cobarruvas, to allow students to learn about birds and take several field trips to sites in the local area to observe birds. John has helped us procure speakers for our Science Night when parents and children come to Sanders to learn about science from various community leaders. He has donated money for field trips, and has generously shared his love of martins with the children at Sanders. His efforts have enriched our students' lives and helped them to become more aware of their environment and the ways we must conserve our natural resources. The "Purple Martin Man" will be treasured at Sanders Elementary for years to come. Jane Thompson—Sanders Elementary, 5th grade teacher and sponsor of Science Club.



Maria Cobarruvas