

David R. Fouts: 2000 **PMCA** Landlord of the Year

Ken Kostka

Purple Martin Conservation Association
Edinboro University of PA
Edinboro, PA 16444

"How well I remember that bright, sunny afternoon in August, standing in the open field near that colony; nearly all that could be heard was the beautiful call of Purple Martins." — Dave Fouts, recalling a late-season afternoon at one of his colony sites in Oregon.

The PMCA is pleased to announce Dave Fouts of Portland, Oregon, as its 2000 Landlord of the Year. Dave has been instrumental in the recovery of Purple Martin populations in Oregon for over 15 years, and we'd like to share his story with you. He has erected and managed approximately 500 single boxes and gourds at sites along 200 miles of the Columbia River in Oregon and Washington, from the mouth of the Columbia River to the Columbia Gorge. These sites include Baker Bay, Ziak Refuge, Tenasillahe Island, Prescott, Gilbert Boat Launch, Sea Scout Docks, Bartlett Landing on Government Island, Skamania Landing, Willamette Park, Nehalem Bay, Hood River, Steamboat Landing Park, Willipa National Wildlife Refuge (NWR), JB Hanson Whitetail Deer Wildlife Refuge, Stiegerwald Lake NWR, Franz Lake NWR, Ridgefield NWR, and ten different sites on Sauvie Island.

Purple Martins inhabiting the Pacific Northwest and Northern California are a distinct subspecies (*Progne subis arboricola*) that have not fully undergone a tradition shift like their eastern cousins (*Progne subis subis*). Some still nest in their traditional way — inside old woodpecker cavities in huge, dead trees,



James R. Hill, III

Dave Fouts at an active gourd site that he manages at Sauvie Island Wildlife Refuge, near Portland, Oregon. Dave was the first person to use gourds for martins on the west coast, where martins rarely are found in a landlord's back yard.

known as snags. When snags began disappearing due to forestry management practices, martins began using cavities in decayed log pilings left over from saw milling and log rafting operations along rivers and bays. Now, with the ever increasing disappearance of log pilings, martins have come to rely heavily on human-supplied housing, usually erected along the same waterways that once hosted the large stands of pilings.

Dave first became familiar with Purple Martins in 1958 as an 11-year-old boy in Michigan, but his odyssey with western Purple Martins didn't begin until 1980, when he travelled to the northern tip of Sauvie Island to photograph Mount St. Helens, a volcano that had recently erupted. Instead of shooting the mountain, Dave ended up using all his film on the martins that he found nesting in old log pilings and a few single-unit nestboxes placed there about five years earlier by Tom Lund and Hubert Prescott, pioneers of Oregon martin conservation. That day was both significant

and remarkable, for the torch had been passed. Dave soon began experimenting with different types of martin housing. He was further motivated by a 1985 *U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service* report¹ that described the drastic decline of Purple Martin populations in the west. Convinced that martins were in need of immediate help, and inspired by his childhood love for martins, Dave became determined to help reverse the martins'

Continued from page 5

downward trend in his western homeland. He stated *"I was convinced by reports from longtime residents that martins were common here until the end of World War II. I believed I could help martins become common here once again."*

Having researched the history of martins in the Pacific Northwest, Dave found that, prior to the mid-1960's, martins were sighted fairly often, and could be found nesting in old woodpecker holes or rot pockets in snags and pilings. Beginning in the mid-1960's, several factors conspired to bring about the martin's downward spiral. Foremost was the spread of the nonnative European Starling and House Sparrow. Aggressive and abundant, both species tended to outcompete martins for the limited number of natural nest cavities available. Martins began to decline about the same time the starling populations boomed. Forestry practices also played a large role in the martins' demise by calling for the removal of large dead snag trees to lower the risk of fires from lightning strikes. Just like in the East hundreds of years earlier, the large snags began disappearing rapidly, and the martins had no choice but to adapt. Luckily, there are hard-working people like Dave to help them out.

Dave's initial efforts were very popular with the martins. Almost all of his single-unit nestboxes were occupied, which confirmed his suspicion that there was a serious shortage of nestboxes. When he began his project in 1985, there were only 80 breeding pairs of Purple Martins along the lower Columbia River. In 1995, there were more than 400, and Dave estimates that if he had received support from public wildlife agencies, that number could have been tripled. Today, there are over 600 pairs. His goal was to make martins common once again. Did he succeed? Fifteen years after his restoration efforts began, the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife commissioned a survey of Purple Martin populations throughout the state. On page 3 of their 1999 report titled, "Distribution, Abundance, and Nest Site Characteristics of Purple Martins in Oregon²," it states *"Purple Martins were locally common along the Columbia River."* Dave's long-term efforts were indeed successful.

It is typical for Dave to deploy a number of nestboxes at an area where martins are reported to be competing for a limited number of cavities. This quick, need-based response strategy is very effective, because the nestboxes are almost immediately occupied, resulting in a nesting attempt. Here, in Dave's own words, is a typical example:

"It came as a complete surprise to me when local biologist, David Marshall, called to inform me that he had observed three pairs of martins on the Columbia River, just west of the town of Hood River. I drove to the site and found the martins competing for a limited number of nesting cavities in a few, old, rotting pilings. The martins were even mobbing a flicker that had recently created a cavity they wanted. With my usual sense of urgency, I quickly loaded a few nestboxes in the truck, hooked up the boat, and drove to Hood River. Not long after, I deployed some boxes at the site, and one was

occupied by a subadult pair of martins. This seemed to reduce the pressure on the martin's benefactor, the cavity-making flicker."

In another example, Dave states:

"As the end of the nesting season approached, I learned that the rumors of a Purple Martin pair nesting at Willamette Park in downtown Portland were true. They were nesting in a piling near the water's edge. During mid-August, the male disappeared, but the female carried on alone, and by the first week in September the young had fledged. If martins return to Willamette Park in 1996, they will find a couple of nestboxes; hopefully, they will use them. The piling they used in 1995 is gone."

Dave has also shown innovative thinking in western martin conservation; examples include the use of gourds and the placement of housing away from large waterways. He was the first person to use gourds in the Pacific Northwest, and found that in some instances, martins actually preferred gourds to traditional single-unit nestboxes. In 1988, he stated,

"At Prescott, Oregon, this summer, I experimented with

gourds supplied by the Purple Martin Conservation Association to see if martins would nest in them. I put up four gourds and was delighted to have martins nest in three of them! This is probably the first time that Purple Martins have nested in gourds here in the Pacific Northwest. Next year I intend to place gourds at other promising locations. Hopefully, we are entering into a new era of Purple Martin management. How much easier it will be to provide nesting sites for martins merely by raising gourds rather than struggling up pilings to attach nestboxes."

Dave found that martins seemed to prefer gourds hung in a cross-arm configuration as opposed to clothesline-style. When the flood of 1996 destroyed many nestboxes, he was able to deploy gourds to ease the housing crunch. He also discovered that martins would accept nontraditional placement of housing as well, as illustrated by this 1988 account:



The Prescott colony site Dave maintains along with landowner Dan Graham is located on the Columbia River. The martins here were very tolerant of human presence.

James R. Hill, III

"This year on Sauvie Island, some Purple Martins demonstrated that they were willing to live away from the main waterways and would accept housing attached to metal poles. It was the opinion of some folks that Purple Martins here in the Northwest would only accept housing that had been placed along the largest waterways, and that nestboxes had to be attached to large diameter wooden poles or pilings. Three years ago, I placed some nestboxes on 14 ft. metal poles, and situated these along the shore of a small inland lake on Sauvie Island. Up until this year, the boxes had only been used by Violet-green Swallows. But then, suddenly, this June [1988], two pairs of martins arrived and set up housekeeping. Perhaps this is the beginning of a new trend in nesting for Purple Martins. Martin management would be much facilitated by metal poles that can easily be transported and set in position. Both gourds and nestboxes can be easily raised and lowered on metal poles."

Dave has been using rectangular, starling-resistant entrance holes (SREHs) on his nestboxes for over ten years. Developed by Tom Lund and Hubert Prescott, rectangular SREHs have been used in the Pacific Northwest since the 1970's, well before the use of crescent SREHs in the east. The entrance is flush with the interior floor and exterior porch, which is stippled for increased traction. Dave came up with the clever idea of attaching the piece of wood that is cut out to create the entrance hole so that it is flush with the top of the entrance, creating a "tunnel effect", and making it even more difficult for starlings to enter. Dave's boxes are 12" long, 6" wide, 7" tall, and constructed of exterior grade plywood.

Backyard Western Martins! The efforts of Dave Fouts have inspired others as well. One account is particularly interesting and unique. This summer [2002], the PMCA visited Dave, who, in addition to taking us on a tour of several colony sites, escorted us to the home of Jerry Park in Scappoose, OR, only a few miles from Dave's Sauvie Island sites. Jerry had tried unsuccessfully for several seasons to attract martins to his backyard using a traditional wooden nestbox. After seeing Dave's gourd arrangements, Jerry set up a gourd rack and attracted martins that same year. His colony site is unique because martins are not a "backyard bird" in the Pacific Northwest. They nest almost exclusively in boxes along large waterways or in forests, where they occupy dead snags. Jerry's is one of the first backyard sites in the West, and it is very popular with the martins. For a moment, I felt like I was back in Pennsylvania! Establishing more inland, residential sites is a good trend, I believe, because if more martins can be attracted to people's backyards, their popularity

will increase, as will the tendency for them to be more efficiently managed and conserved.

Dave later escorted us to his Prescott colony site, which he maintains along with landowner Dan Graham. We sat only a few meters away from martins nesting quite low in wooden boxes along the bank of the Columbia River. The martins were tame and allowed us to photograph them as they fed their young. As we relaxed in the beach chairs that Dan had provided, the sun drew lower in the sky and it was with sadness that we realized we

needed to move on. Having enjoyed a full day of Dave's company and the company of martins that his efforts had made possible, we reluctantly prepared to leave. Dave smiled and wished us well. It seems appropriate to end at the beginning, and so I leave you with Dave's words:

"On a hot summer day in 1958, I was standing on a lake shore in southern Michigan when suddenly my attention was drawn to some birds that were fly-



James R. Hill, III

Dave's boxes are 12" long, 6" wide, 7" tall, and constructed of exterior grade plywood. Here an adult male inspects us before taking a meal to its young.

ing around some elaborate apartment-style birdhouses. This aroused my curiosity, so I moved closer to have a better look. What fascinated me most about these birds was their melodious song, their beautiful color, and their gregarious nature. For an 11-year-old boy, it was love at first sight. Not long afterwards I learned that these birds were Purple Martins, and best of all, I learned it was possible to have a colony of these wonderful birds in one's own backyard.

My efforts to attract Purple Martins to our own backyard in a Chicago suburb met with only minimal success, but this didn't diminish my love for these birds. When my family decided to move to the Pacific Northwest in 1963, I was reluctant to go with them until I learned that the Purple Martin's range included much of the west coast. After that realization, I decided that the Northwest might not be such a bad place to live after all."

Dave has mentored many others in the Pacific Northwest, encouraging them to put up housing. He is a charter member of the PMCA, and has written several articles for the *Update* including "The Plight of the Purple Martin in the Pacific Northwest" in *Update* 1(3) and "Ten Years Helping Purple Martins in the Pacific Northwest" in *Update* 7(1).

Dave Fouts is the PMCA's ninth Landlord of the Year and it is with great satisfaction that we present him with this award.

¹"Guidelines for the Management of the Purple Martin, Pacific Coast Population" U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 1985.

²Horvath, Eric "Distribution, Abundance, and Nest Site Characteristics of Purple Martins in Oregon," Oregon Department of Fish & Wildlife. 1999. p.3. Technical report #99-1-01

