



James R. Hill, III

PMCA 2002 Landlord of the Year, Allen Jackson

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The *PMCA* is very pleased to honor Allen Jackson, of Millville, New Jersey, as its 2002 Landlord of the Year. While in no way comparable to meeting the man himself, we hope this article will serve as an introduction, because Allen is a person worth knowing. And although he gives much of the credit for his accomplishments to the *PMCA*, it is clear to us that Allen is an exceptional person, one who wants nothing more than to be fully involved in martin conservation and landlord education, simply to help the birds (and the landlords) thrive in their mutual dependency. He provides hands-on assistance, in abundance, to anyone with an interest in hosting martins. Thanks to Allen's willingness to approach people, communities, schools, etc., there are more active sites than ever in New Jersey, all being managed to the best of the landlords' abilities.

Allen's weekends as well as his evenings are filled with site visits and consultations. The time and effort he puts in are well-rewarded, though. He has provided technical assistance

to National Wildlife Refuges, state wildlife management areas, state parks, local and county governments, military bases, environmental groups, plus some area nurseries and nine schools. The majority of his work, however, is focused on individuals with an interest in martins. He is currently working with about 70 active colonies, 20 of them fledging 100 or more young each season.

Allen is something of a Johnny Appleseed-type, only rather than journey around the country planting apple seeds, he plants ideas about helping Purple Martins. He goes about offering his help to anyone who might have even the slightest degree of interest, but never pushing too much. Then he waits — eventually, he has found, he usually gets a call, when someone is ready to get more involved with their martins. He makes sure every site he assists with is equipped with pole guards and owl guards, has accessible housing, knows the importance of controlling House Sparrows and starlings, understands that managing and keeping records are a key to

success with Purple Martins, and that they know he will be there to help them when they have a problem.

Allen was raised in Chepachet, Rhode Island, where Lake Jackson, his father, had martins for a few years, and also enjoyed working with bluebirds. Allen's mother, Marie, shared his interest in nature and the environment. He majored in Wildlife Management and graduated from the University of New Hampshire in 1974. After four years in the US Air Force he spent two years with the US Environmental Protection Agency and four years with the US Fish & Wildlife Service in Massachusetts. He's been employed as a Wildlife Biologist for 21 years by the US Fish & Wildlife Service in its New Jersey Field Office (NJFO) in Pleasantville, NJ. The NJFO covers the entire state of New Jersey and deals with endangered species, wetland protection, contaminant issues, and habitat restoration. He

helped start colonies in upstate NY in the early 90's, assisting with the Partners for Fish & Wildlife program. Almost all of the work he does with martins, however, has been accomplished entirely on his own time, after work and on weekends. States Allen, "Other work responsibilities restrict my involvement with martins, but I have managed to promote martin management at military bases, federal facilities, and with selected interested people as the opportunities arise."

Allen was a confirmed bachelor, he says, until he "met his match" when Billie came along. They met on a bicycling trip to Vermont in 1994 and married in 1995. Besides Billie, Allen gained a family of 6 children and 5 grandchildren and says that their one great-grandchild, Trevor Allen, is a potential 'Martin Master' for southern NJ.

Martin History: "My father bought a Trio Musselman house at a yard sale in the late 1970's. He mounted it on a cedar pole that was accessible only by tilting the pole. There were no pole or predator guards on the house, either. Surprisingly, he had a few pairs of martins show up in the early 80's. Mom thought the birds were very noisy and wanted Dad to take the house down! Dad never had more than three pairs and after a few years the site was abandoned because he did not manage the martins in any way. Looking back, he had House Sparrows, starlings, and various predator problems. No wonder the birds abandoned!

In 1988 I saw some information about the PMCA and their project to register colony sites. I gave Dad (and myself) a

membership in the PMCA and bought him a Duracraft house, hoping the martins would return, but they never did. Even after starting my two colonies in NJ, it took me a few years to accept that the PMCA was correct, and to have a successful colony, one must manage it. So, I had to learn the hard way. That may be the reason I am such a staunch supporter of the PMCA and their

Mentor Program now. I have been there, done that. I have seen the results of managing a colony the proper way, fledging 275 young this year, in just my 4th and 5th years of having my two colonies."

His first colony was established at the Custard Corral, an ice cream shop owned by his daughter, Corey, and located on the outskirts of Millville. A martin house was placed out in the open lawn behind the restaurant. Outdoor tables and a playground area offer patrons an opportunity to sit outside and enjoy the martins' activities along with



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Left: PMCA Landlord of the Year for 2002, Allen Jackson, of Millville, NJ holding a map of southern NJ with dots showing all the colony sites whose landlords he mentors. Behind Allen is the colony site he manages at the Custard Corral. Above: One of the gourd racks at the Custard Corral.

their ice cream. Allen's first housing was set up on Memorial Day of 1998. He played the dawn song and attracted adult martins in 15 minutes! That first pair nested and fledged three young. Forty-three pairs nested at the Custard Corral in 2002. In the future, he hopes to use this spacious location to host martin workshops.

When PMCA Director, James R. Hill, III, and Education Coordinator, Louise Chambers, paid a visit to the Jackson's home in June of 2002, we saw a martin colony in a setting that, according to Allen, "goes against what martin habitat should be." It is in the midst of the city, and their small lot is surrounded by nine more homes. Numerous large trees, 60 to 75 feet tall, are close to the martin housing. Allen notes that if one looks at population density maps for martins, the density of martins in NJ is equal to that of North Carolina. Because of this higher density, he has found that martins in NJ can be attracted to habitat that would not be successful in areas with lower population densities. "The martins have a few glide zones to get to the housing units and appear to treat the trees as obstacles (almost as games) to maneuver around. I try to keep this colony smaller, about 24 compartments. I started playing the dawn song from 4 AM to 10 AM on 4 April 1999. Three days later I had adult martins visiting! I kept playing the dawn song for about two months until I saw the martins building nests. Six pairs nested that first year, and 21 pairs nested here in 2002, fledging about 100 young."

Allen states that he is mainly "a gourd man. In NJ, they seem to be preferred by the martins. This may be because of long-time landlords like Merrill Ivins and Bob Hertzog, who have been using natural gourds and managing martins long before I moved into the area." Allen has worked with a variety of housing types: aluminum houses, wooden houses, as well as natural and plastic gourds. Besides upgrading houses to have larger nest compartments, he has also tried most of the new entrance hole innovations, from crescents to Excluders, to Washburn tunnels, porches, no porches, etc. One thing you won't see—any house or gourd system of Allen's that lacks a pole guard or owl guards. Often there will be an S&S Controller visible somewhere nearby, because once housing is converted to starling-resistant entrance holes, starlings are very readily attracted to an S&S Controller with its round entrance holes.

Special Conservation Projects: *Cape May Point State Park (CMPSP)* on the southern tip of New Jersey

has long been known as a special place to birders. There were martins at the park, in six older houses that were not manageable and had as many House Sparrows nesting in them as martins. Noticing that the martin numbers at the park were dwindling rapidly, Allen coordinated with the park supervisor, Dean Cramer, and the *PMCA*, to get a special project in place, supplying the park with a new martin house and some gourds. He also worked with local birders and landlords to ensure that the housing would be regularly monitored by volunteers.

Allen credits most of the project's success to Dave Thomas and Harris Lighty, who have spent hours monitoring the T-14 setup. The program was so successful that 11 of 18 units were used the first season, 2001. Greg Fletcher, maintenance supervisor, then built a second T-14. Not only was the original T-14 full in 2002 but the second house had 14 of 18 units occupied. To go from six to 32 pairs in two years is excellent. To share with the public a highly accessible and enjoyable example of a well-managed colony site is even more valuable.

Dave has since built two T-14 houses for the *New Jersey Audubon Society's (NJAS) Cape May Bird Observatory* property in Goshen in an effort to increase their small colony. The *NJAS* is a leader in environmental education. This demonstration site will provide valuable opportunities in furthering how to properly manage martins.

Allen gives several slide programs/workshops every year. One of his lectures, for *Citizens United* (a nonprofit group that works to protect the Maurice River and its tributaries), grew "legs" of its own when several volunteers approached him about adding martin housing to various locations along the

Maurice River, recently awarded National Park Service designation as a wild and scenic river. Working with the *Commercial Township Environmental Commission*, Allen assisted in setting up five sites in 2002 (two schools, one municipal building, one riverfront park, and one restored wetland area). A sixth setup will be added in 2003.

With the *US Fish & Wildlife Service*, Allen has worked to have Purple Martins & their management needs incorporated into *NJFO's* Partners for Fish & Wildlife Program by providing interested and eligible landowners with martin housing in exchange for their agreements to manage the housing properly. The *NJFO* is also encouraging Purple Martin management on the Service's five National Wildlife Refuges in New Jersey, recognizing that refuges offer excellent opportunities to showcase proper management.

Why go to such efforts? Not content just to manage his own two sites, Allen

comments, "Martins in the north are undergoing a steady decline in population. Providing proper housing, protecting your martins, and actively managing your colony can be the key that enables martin populations to reverse." He also notes, "The biggest and most frustrating problem I encounter is controlling House Sparrows, which can cause more losses and inflict more harm to martins than any other cause. House Sparrows have to be eliminated, pulling out nesting material is simply not enough. While I appreciate a person's reluctance to kill House Sparrows, I wish they could see the true destructive capabilities that House Sparrows have in many martin colonies. Control these pests and watch your colony respond."

Publications: Allen reaches still more individuals and organizations via print; he had an article published in *NJFO's Field Notes* that was accompanied by the *PMCA's "Best Management Practices."* He also developed "Purple Martin Alert: A Proactive Approach" that he distributes to landlords along with *PMCA* literature. He has authored or contributed to articles for several issues of the *Purple Martin Update*, too.

Banding: An employee at *Edwin B. Forsythe National Wildlife Refuge* suggested that Allen apply for a banding permit. He has since banded about 6,000 martins in NJ. In 2001, Allen's mentee, Tim Shaheen, also received a subpermit. They expect to band over 3,000 birds in 2003.

As an encouragement to his mentees, a landlord that fledges 100 young or more in a season is awarded the designation of 'Martin Master.' "Fledging 100 young is not that hard to do," he says, "and it does make a trip to band more justified. I actually try to recommend that landlords keep their



Jane Morton Galetto

Allen Jackson (left) bands a nestling martin at the colony site of his mentee, Pete Galetto (right), who watches from his dock-mounted rack of SuperGourds along the Maurice River in southern New Jersey (see back cover).

colony around 25-50 pairs. I agree with the PMCA, it is better to spread the wealth around. You also want hosting a colony to be fun, not a chore. While we do not make it a big deal, the term 'Martin Master' adds a little significance and recognition to a landlord who has worked hard to manage their colony properly and fledge 100 young in a season."

Mentoring & Partnerships: Says Allen, "Tim Shaheen is also a PMCA Martin Mentor and has an exceptional talent working with landlords. Tim now covers Ocean and Monmouth Counties, while I cover southern NJ. We enjoy working together. Other landlords have stepped forward to become strong advocates: Steve Pendino, Bill Feidler, Lou Pollicino, Alice Creamer, Darrel Apps, Tom Burton, Jim and Winnie Watson, Tom Hupf, Dean Cramer, David Thomas, Harris

Lighty, Bob Hertzog, Merrill Ivins, Nora Gerbereaux, Lenore Keeney and Scott Eves. Maureen Barrett, a science teacher, Pat Sutton of New Jersey Audubon, and Denny Parry are showing great interest in helping to promote proper management. Susan Wheeler in PA and Barry Picard in RI are getting seriously involved. Sue participated in a nest check at Cape May Point State Park and is now promoting martins at parks in PA. Barry has helped me band for two years, learned about management, photographed martins, and taken his experiences back to RI and educated others. I am only taking what the PMCA has provided and share it. I tie it in with the 70 colonies that Tim and I get to work with. Most of the landlords we know are genuine people who have developed the same fascination for martins. I feel fortunate to have met these special people and enjoy sharing a common bond for a wildlife species so dependent upon humans for survival."

Landlord Philosophy: "I like to promote that there is not another species of wildlife that you can manage and make such a significant difference simply by proper management in your backyard. With what other wildlife species can you fledge over 100 young 50 feet from your house? Establishing and managing a martin colony allows one to satisfy that secret desire to be a wildlife manager. It is important for me to let people know that they can make a significant difference to the martins.

I believe it is important to conduct a site visit before making any recommendations to a landowner, giving that necessary and much appreciated individual attention. I then approach attracting martins the least expensive way. Let's get martins first, then work towards upgrading. I cannot recommend that a person spend \$500 on a martin setup not knowing if they will get birds. The objective of having a healthy and productive colony cannot

be achieved overnight. It takes many years of gradual changes. Getting over the hump of spending big money for a species is a major hurdle for many people. Martineering can be accomplished at many levels. I give products (used houses, Super-Gourds, porch dividers, predator guards, pole guards) and donate my time for the benefit of the bird. Volunteering my services has given me a great sense of satisfaction.



Allen Jackson (left) keynote speaker at the Cumberland County Purple Martin Festival on 17 August 2002 in Mauricetown, NJ, discussing martin housing with Bob Blizzard.

The Press of Atlantic City/Mary Godleski

Why do I do it? 1) I learned the hard way. Neither Dad nor I realized how fortunate we were to have had a colony in Rhode Island. The martins abandoned the site for the main reasons commonly identified by the PMCA. Populations in RI are struggling to survive. Had we managed the colony properly, the situation in RI might be significantly better. 2) As a professional wildlife biologist, I believe it is important to set a

good example, especially if I am going to mentor other potential landlords. 3) Most sites I see still have the wrong housing in the wrong location, do not control predators, and do not conduct nest checks. Educating the public is much more important than most people think. 4) I believe that individual people can and want to make a difference, they just need the proper tools. 5) I believe NJ is in a critical location to the northeast. Efforts here are important to martin populations further north. 6) But I do it mainly because I strongly believe that managing martins the proper way is important to the species and I see that it is making a difference.

What is my biggest reward? I get great satisfaction when I hear landlords tell me managing martins according to the PMCA's recommendations has opened up a whole new world to them and how they enjoy their colony so much more. The ultimate compliment is when they subsequently advocate proper management or become mentors themselves. Who would have thought that in a few short years, 20 landlords now routinely fledge more than 100 young per year. Almost all of these are newly established colonies.

It's hard to believe a bird can have so much of an impact on a person, but it truly is a magnificent bird. I am fortunate to be in a perfect location for Purple Martins, not only to be able to have a martin colony, but to be able to work with so many other great people who also care."

Doubtless, the efforts that Allen makes on behalf of martins and their landlords are bearing fruit and will continue to do so for years to come. Please join us in congratulating Allen Jackson, the PMCA's 11th Landlord of the Year.



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