

# Pellet Guns for Landlords

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**F**or eons Purple Martins have successfully coexisted with predators: owls, hawks, snakes and the four-legged varieties. For the last hundred or so years, however, they

have been increasingly plagued by two introduced nonnative birds, House Sparrows and European Starlings, the “blunt instruments” of the avian world. Letters in *The Doctor's House Calls* and *Landlord Letters* continue to describe how these two incredibly invasive and aggressive pests preempt nest cavities, peck holes in martin eggs, push nestlings out of nests and if left unchecked, totally displace our native cavity-nesting birds. These two critters must be dealt with in order for our martins to prosper. While there are a variety of deterrents, perhaps most notably starling resistant entrance holes (SREHs), most of us ultimately find that effective control requires trapping and/or shooting the pests. Yes, shooting—an uneasy subject for many but for those electing to employ this technique, what are the considerations?

First and foremost, safety must be considered. High-powered precision pellet airguns are vastly less hazardous than firearms and may be used with care in locations where firearms would be unsafe or not permitted. There are usually minimal airgun ownership regulations in most areas, or none at all, but you should confirm this by checking with your local police department. These guns make little noise and are generally neighborhood friendly.

While airguns come in many types and styles, a single shot Spring-Piston airgun in .177 caliber is practical, accurate, reliable, easy to maintain and has sufficient power to do the job humanely. From the picture you can see these are full size adult weapons generally weighing between six and ten pounds—a far cry from the “BB” guns many of us grew up with. They are cocked (made ready to shoot) by holding the barrel in one hand, the stock in the other and

breaking the gun in half at the breech, a hinging motion that requires a cocking effort generally ranging from 25 to 40 pounds. It's a simple motion but does require reasonable strength.

The extremely small vulnerable areas of House Sparrows and starlings require accuracy that can only be realized through the use of a properly mounted telescopic sight, generally of 3-4 power (your target is magnified 3-4 times). Even with the gun and scope combination all but a superb marksman will find it necessary to shoot with some sort of gun-stabilizing rest such as a windowsill or door frame. The errant shot marks on the wooden house are mute evidence that my original bargain equipment was quite inaccurate. I strongly urge anyone buy-

ing his or her first gun-scope combination to be sure to get good quality for which you should expect to pay about \$350 or more. You will find a great variety of choices on the Internet under “airguns” and through other conventional sources like Cabelas outdoor catalog. With a fine gun and scope now I seldom miss at the 30-90 foot distances from my backdoor to my nest boxes.

I've had the pleasure of seeing our Purple Martin colony in this immediate area grow from one pair in 1993 to about 20 pairs last season. Good pest control was a significant part of this increase. An interesting difference between the House Sparrows and starlings is that the starlings seem to have developed some sort of collective wisdom that this is a pest-species unfriendly neighborhood—they rarely investigate my nest boxes now.

The House Sparrows have yet to learn this but I am ready for them!

(Note: The Western race of Purple Martin (*Progne subis arboricola*) nests in single boxes, rather than the communal-style housing used in the Eastern half of North America.) *Dick Haward has been a landlord since 1994.*



**Pellet guns can be a very effective aid in controlling starlings and House Sparrows. Their use can also result in extra ventilation holes in martin houses and gourds, so use them with care!**



Photos by Richard Haward

**Annie "Oakley" Haward demonstrates the method used to charge the pellet gun used for starling & House Sparrow control at their coastal Oregon colony site.**

