

How I Spent My Summer Vacation: Volunteering with the PMCA

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When I first saw the signs from the *Purple Martin Conservation Association (PMCA)* seeking volunteers on the bulletin board at school (*Edinboro University of Pennsylvania*), I knew that I had to look into it. I had been thinking for some time that I should do an internship or something similar in the field of biology for my summer vacation. I also knew that I loved birds and would thoroughly enjoy working with them. The *PMCA* was first on my list of possible internships I would like to do. When I e-mailed Louise Chambers I was welcomed to stop by and see the *PMCA* office.

My first day with the *PMCA* was almost overwhelming. I was trying to remember everyone's name and absorb all sorts of Purple Martin information. I had brought my spotting scope and was sent off with Ken Kostka to read colored leg bands on martins. We went over to one of the research sites on Edinboro Lake. I would find out later that reading bands



James R. Hill, III



Ken Kostka

Upper photo: *Edinboro University* student Pat Kramer prepares to unload the replica Native American gourd rack at a colony site near Edinboro, where the gourd pole will be set up for a photographer from the *British Broadcasting Corporation*.

Lower photo: Ken Kostka photographed this albino fledgling on August 27, 2001, at *Presque Isle State Park* in Erie, PA. Seeing this unusual plumage could be considered a reward for the many hours of band-reading Jamie, Ken, Louise and Pat put in at the roost site. Many other observers were also able to view the bird since it was seen numerous times over a period of several weeks. "We were fortunate to have this albino at the *Presque Isle martin roost* in Erie, PA, this summer. A hatching-year bird, sex unknown (HY-U), it was easy to pick out among the thousands of other martins, even in flight."

was going to be my primary function as a *PMCA* intern.

The next day I made the 'mistake' of asking the *PMCA*'s director, James R. Hill, III, what I could do. He pointed to a large bin that was heaped with print-outs from the Purple Martin Forum and e-mails, "I need these sorted." That kept me busy for a full two or three days. I ended up sorting two more of those bins. It wasn't all work though; much of that material was really interesting to read. I learned a lot about martins by simply reading two years of Forum print-outs. This was the first time that I heard about the battles that people have with European Starlings and House Sparrows. I realized immediately that it was a hot issue.

I spent most of my time doing field-work, usually with Ken Kostka. We would spend the mornings reading bands at the three *PMCA* research sites. Reading bands was not easy at first; it took me a while to get it down. It definitely takes some practice. You also have to learn all the different plumages

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so that you can determine the birds' age and sex. Often we would drive to somebody else's colony site in our area, and I met lots of local martin landlords in this manner. Our travels took us to Ohio a few times, too, but mostly we stayed in Erie and Crawford Counties of Pennsylvania. Each day in the field meant some time would be spent writing in logbooks back at the office at the end of the day.

I looked forward to each Monday, knowing that it was nest check day. Checking nests was definitely one of my favorite things about my internship. Before this summer, I had never gotten to see the active nest of any bird up close. So Mondays were certainly a treat. I learned more by doing nest checks than I could have learned from books. As the summer progressed, I saw the nesting cycle of these great birds, from nest building to fledging young. What a neat experience it was to see first hand the baby birds' development from helpless little things into able fliers.

On one of my first nest checks, we found an adult male that had his foot tangled in some twine left from a House Sparrow nest (see *Update* 10(3), page 17). You could tell that he'd been struggling by the massive knot. The bird was cut free of that mess and banded. I was allowed to carry the bird back to the colony site. This was the first bird that I ever held, so it was very exciting. I had a smile from ear to ear as I held that small, fragile bird in my hands. Once we got back to the site, I held my arm up, opened my hand, and the bird flew away. Ken and I kept an eye on him as he took a drink and fed over Edinboro Lake. He was soon back to normal.

I've known for some time that I wanted to contribute to science by doing research. To me, one of the symbols of such scientific contributions, in ornithology, is bird banding. Under the supervision of James R. Hill, III, and Ken Kostka, I was able to band nestling martins. Looking back at the summer, the banding is what I enjoyed the most. I estimate that I banded approximately 500 nestlings, many of which were at Andy

Troyer's colony site in Conneautville, PA. I would like to thank Andy, Adam, and Marcus Troyer for making that possible.

At the end of the breeding season, when martins left their colony sites and headed for the staging areas of *Presque Isle State Park* in Erie, PA, we followed them. The swarms of birds that roost there simply amaze me. The skies over the reeds off Sommerheim Drive are darkened with birds around sunset

each night. Lots of early mornings and evenings were spent at these roosts reading bands. I only got pooped on twice! Compared to Louise Chambers, that's pretty good.

One night an albino Purple Martin showed up. It wasn't a total albino because its eyes were brown, not pink. It also had very faint coloration of its breast feathers in the form of vertical streaks. Otherwise this was an all-white bird. Its feet were pink, and the bill was yellowish-pink in color. This bird was absolutely beautiful, and I was awestruck. For 40 minutes Ken and I watched this bird, even though we were there to read bands. At one point, Ken intentionally flushed the martins, because they were harassing the strange bird. The albino really stood out against the sky, making it easy to track, even at a distance. It was the first wild albino creature I ever saw.

Midway through the summer, we assisted Barry Britton, a cameraman from the *BBC (British Broadcasting Corporation)*, in getting some footage of Purple Martins. He needed to film martins nesting in an Indian gourd rack for a

documentary about the impact people have had on the natural world. This gourd rack had to look just like what the Indians would have used. Jamie Hill and Ken Kostka found the wood and Louise Chambers found the rawhide strips. When the rack was all put together, it looked great. We got some really strange looks when we carried that giant cross down to the lake. Jamie, Ken, and I erected the rack the day before Barry Britton arrived. I have to say that given the amount of time we had, the rack turned out beautifully. I can't imagine a better representation of an Indian gourd rack.



James R. Hill, III

BBC filmmaker, Barry Britton, shooting footage of Purple Martins at the PMCA's research site in Edinboro, Pennsylvania, during the summer of 2001. The PMCA built this replica of a Native American gourd rack for the episode the BBC is filming. This is the BBC's third trip to Edinboro, PA, to film martins.

We also placed a natural, unpainted gourd on a nearby *PMCA* gourd rack in the place of an active, modified natural gourd. We had hoped that the martins would go feed their babies in the unpainted gourd for some great shots. No such luck, however; the martins mobbed this strange object as if it were a predator. All the original gourds were white, so when the martins saw this brown, unpainted gourd, they freaked out. The martins were stirred up for hours. We had to give up and replace the original gourd. The next day we switched a nest with older babies, thinking the parents would want to feed badly enough to overcome their fear. This was exactly the case, as they took to it in record time. We were relieved that Barry would get his shots.

I met the crew down at the Indian rack the next morning; this was when I met Barry. He was a very interesting fellow. He filmed most of the morning and again in the evening.

We had to lower the nearby housing to manipulate the birds to sit on the replica rack. They were quite reluctant, but Barry eventually got the shots he wanted.

Barry needed some footage of the rack with a different backdrop. He needed a forest, not a lake. So we tied that huge thing to the roof of the *PMCA*'s van and drove to a good site 10-15 miles away. If we went over 30 MPH, the gourds would swing around violently, so it was a long drive. Once we got to the new site, we again erected the cumbersome gourd rack. Barry wanted to wait for the evening's good light to shoot any more film.

In the meantime, Jamie suggested that Barry film the interior of the nest, just as the *BBC* crew did during their first visit, for the program "*Bird Nuts, the Magnificent Obsession.*" Before long we were at Al and Mary Leonardi's house in McKean, PA, cutting holes in one of their natural gourds. Barry had this strange lens that allowed him to be at a minor distance (2 feet) and still have a lens in the gourd. He stood in a bird blind and filmed martins feeding their young inside the gourd. Barry let us look through his camera to see what the pictures were going to look like, and it was unbelievable.

The whole time Barry was in town, the cameras were rolling. He literally finished shooting just before he had to leave to catch his plane. To my knowledge, Barry managed to get all the film he wanted, plus a little extra. I can't wait to see the finished product.

The *PMCA* runs smoothly, although I would like to think that I helped to ensure they operate even more smoothly in the years to come. I designed a data form for entering observed leg band numbers. I also made a few convenient reference sheets that made some of my work ten times faster, making a 10-pound notebook nearly obsolete! I also wrote up, with some direction, an internship form that *Edinboro University* can give to interested students in the future. I just have to share the *PMCA* with my fellow students, and vice versa.

My future plans with the *PMCA* include doing an official internship for college credit this fall. I will be doing the dirty work involved with an ongoing gizzard study. We hope to determine at what age young Purple Martins are fed grit, along with the quantity, size, and composition of the grit. Beyond that, I intend to stay in contact with the *PMCA* and to help whenever I can. If



James R. Hill, III

Author and *PMCA* intern, Pat Kramer (foreground), with Ken Kostka (background) looking for color bands at the colony site of Ron and Iris Worden, of Springboro, Pennsylvania. In the last four years, the *PMCA* has found over 60 color-banded martins breeding here, despite having never banded a single bird at this site!

they ever need help, they know whom to call.

I would like to thank all the people at the *PMCA*. They often thank me for being a help to them, but I feel that they deserve the thanks. I feel fortunate that I was able to volunteer my whole summer. I couldn't have done it without my understanding parents being so supportive of me. (I'm a poor student with no income.) Jamie, Ken, and Louise have answered thousands of my questions, all summer long. They have taught me more than I can articulate. They have also loaned me some great books to read, and encouraged me to pursue my interests further. I don't think that I would have read an ornithology textbook from cover to cover on my own. Joan Duke was my vegetarian support; we're the only two members of the *PMCA* staff Vegetarian Club. Paul Aranyos, the *PMCA*'s business manager, amused us all with his sense of humor and listened to all my stories about House Sparrows.

In working with the *PMCA*, I have learned so much about the Purple Martin. I've also fallen in love with these birds. I've learned a lot about their behavior, vocalizations, nesting needs and preferences, their plumages, and a detailed life history. I bet that I could even answer the *PMCA* phones and answer questions. But I'll leave that up to the staff; I would rather be outside with the birds. Someday, when I have my own place, I will provide my own housing for these wonderful birds. I look forward to my life as a martin landlord and friend of the *PMCA*.

