

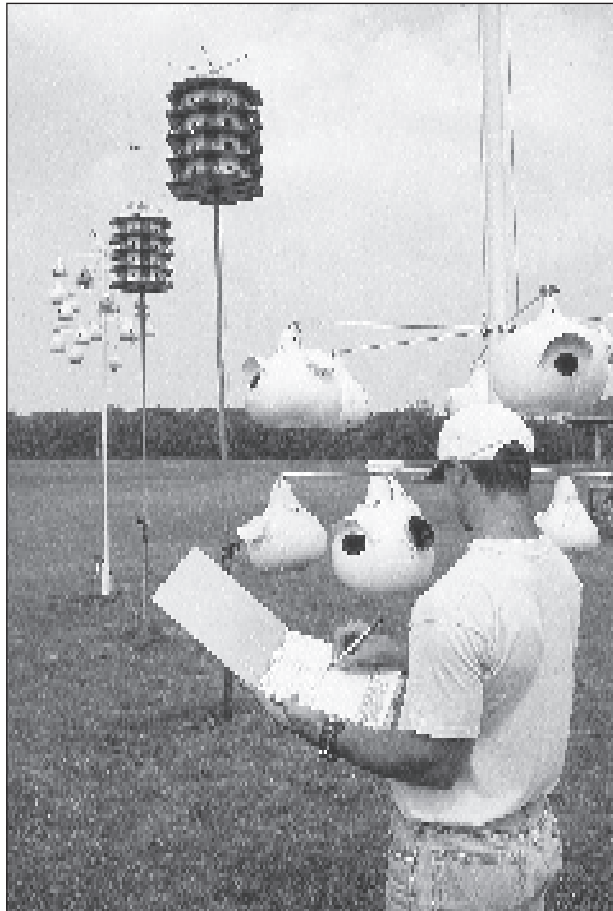
# Project Martinwatch: A Progress Report

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**W**e are very excited about the valuable data included on the completed *Project Martinwatch* sheets that are beginning to trickle in. But we want more! If you haven't sent in your data yet, or if you have hesitated to do so because it's incomplete, please clean out your martin housing and finalize your forms. Even incomplete data forms yield some information. If you did not participate this season, but conducted regular nest checks and kept written records, we urge you to copy the sheets and share them with us. We'll obtain useful information on the 1995 martin season. And don't forget to plan ahead for next year. If converting to winch- or pulley-operated housing will help you manage your site more easily next year (and allow you to participate in this international data-gathering project), don't wait until next spring to make those housing changes and improvements.

## Why It's Important That You Participate

As can be seen from the population trend article beginning on page 2 of this *Update*, there is still so much we don't know about the factors affecting continent-wide population changes in the Purple Martin. Fortunately, we have the means to solve this mystery, and several others as well. If we can just get the participation of 50 martin landlords from each of the approximately 40 states and provinces where martins breed in human-supplied housing, we would have accurate reproductive data from 2,000 sites and about 40,000 pairs of martins! Yearly samples of this size would answer dozens of questions about martins. And participation is extremely easy for anyone who manages their site correctly. You simply write down what you find in each compartment on each nest check, and also write down anything you might do to the contents of each nest. Continue your nest checks until the very last nestling has fledged. What could be easier? And remember, the answers we learn to all these questions will allow martin landlords everywhere to manage their colony sites better.



Scott Melego, the PMCA's 1994-1995 summer intern, recording nest-content information directly onto a *Project Martinwatch* data form.

## Participant Feedback

**John Fuller • Edmonton, Alberta** *"The intent of your organization to have landlords be more responsible by completing Project Martinwatch report cards is an excellent idea. I believe that I have become more aware of the various stages of a martin's development and it has made me more responsible in the management of my colony site."*

**Douglas C. Walters • Warren, PA** *"I do feel that constant nest checking definitely increases the odds of survival in favor of the birds. This year I used nest replacement to control nest parasites, as you suggest."* [Editorial comment: **Having a martin colony is like having a garden. If all you do is throw some seeds on the ground in Spring, and don't return to the plot again until Fall, don't expect an abundant harvest. To be productive, martin colonies, like gardens, require weekly, hands-on, attention.]**

**Carol Bunyard • Norman, OK** *"Because I was unable to determine the exact clutch-initiation date, I began doing daily nest checks when I knew the eggs were due to hatch. I was, therefore, able to determine the earliest possible fledging date [using a known hatching date]. Project Martinwatch has been fun, and I've learned a lot."* [Editorial comment: **Carol did 7-day nest checks during egg-laying. Under this timetable, situations often arise where only a range of possible dates can be determined for clutch initiation (as opposed to the exact date). This is why 4- or 5-day nest-check routines are better during egg-laying.]**

**Norb Holtgrewe • Fayetteville, OH** *"I did not get martins to nest for the first two years, until I called the PMCA and was told to hang natural gourds under my aluminum houses. I had luck within a week of adding gourds. With two aluminum houses and 6 gourds under each, doing the Project Martinwatch data sheet was a little bit of work, but it made everything much more fun. The results speak for themselves. Thirty-one fledged from 8 pairs! Nest checking was easy and fast using your methods."*

Charles McKnight • Malakoff, TX “The martins seemed agitated so we lowered and inspected only the new house on the May 21st nest check.” [Editorial comment: When martins exhibit agitation before you enter the yard to do a nest check, this could indicate something is wrong. Doing a complete nest check might have revealed what that was.]

Johanna Rankin • Copperas Cove, TX “The martins get upset and act very disturbed after each nest check. Your recommended nest checks every five days are too much disruption and not good in my humble opinion.” [Editorial comment: For landlords not in the habit of doing regular nest checks, it may seem that martins get very upset during nest checks — this is normal. They think we are predators! This is why nest checks should be done as quickly and quietly as possible. Rest assured, 15 years of research at the PMCA has demonstrated conclusively that frequent nest-checks, done correctly, are beneficial, not detrimental, to the martins. Seven-day checks are better than no checks, but during the egg-laying phase of the martin’s cycle, four- or five-day checks are the best way for a landlord to pinpoint exact clutch-initiation dates (CID). CID is necessary to determine earliest-possible fledging date and, thus, the true outcome of each active nest.]

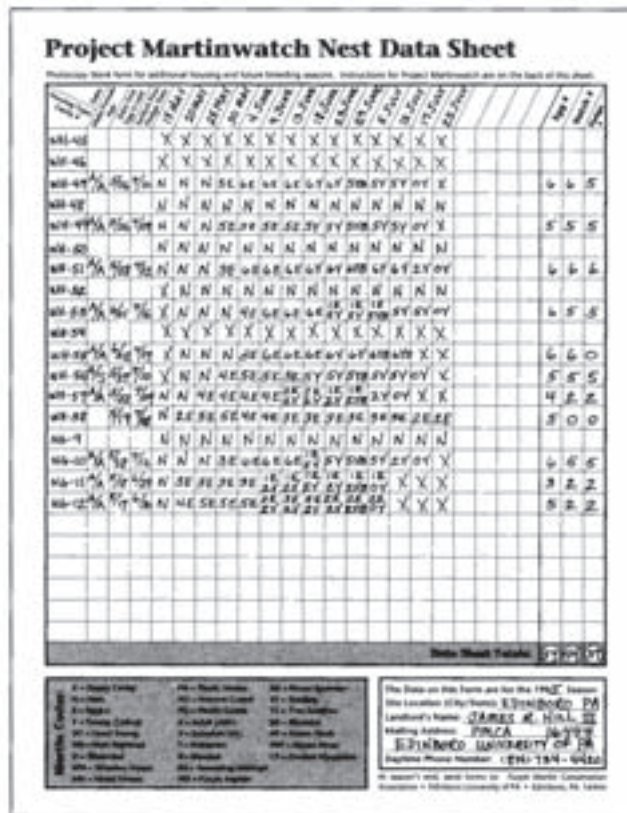
Sheila Joyce • Vermillion, OH “On July 30th, when we checked the nest, two nestlings flew out. So I decided to wait until they all had fledged before bothering them again.” [Editorial comment: Some landlords are reluctant to do nest checks after the young reach about 20-23 days of age, fearing it could cause premature fledging. At the PMCA, we’ve looked in on over 6,000 fledging-age young from over 1,200 active nests, and have caused fewer than 10 premature fledgings. And most of those were due to carelessness on our part. In all these years, we’ve learned a few tricks to insure we don’t cause premature fledging. Here are some tips: After the young in any house reach about 23 days of age, be extra quiet during a nest check. If you make quick movements, or shout when a house door or gourd cap is opened, young of this age could flutter out. Don’t reach in to touch young of this age, if you can help it. When you check a nest with older nestlings, they will be piled on top of each other, making an accurate count more difficult. If the “earliest possible fledging date” (EPFD) has already been reached in a particular nest, an accurate count of young still in that nest is not that critical, because

any missing young will be assumed to have fledged. Just write down how many you think you see. On the other hand, if the EPFD hasn’t been reached yet for a nest, then an accurate count is necessary. Check your data sheet to see how many young were alive on the last check. Look for that many. If you can’t make an accurate count because the nestlings are all on top of each other, use a long, blunt probe to separate the feathered huddle. Nestlings are far less afraid of an inanimate object than a human hand, and won’t try to fly. We use a 24-inch-long, 3/8" wooden dowel with rounded ends to gently, but firmly, push the young aside until we’re able to count them all.

When working with a nestful of young near, or at, fledging age, always use your free hand to keep the exit opening covered. In this way, the young will be far less likely to “make a run for it.” This strategy also allows the landlord to grab that rare youngster that does try to take flight. If a bird does fly away, don’t worry. Most of the time you’ll discover they fly very well anyway, indicating that it wasn’t their first flight. Remember, fledglings often return to their nests each evening (or late afternoon) for up to a week after fledging. So it’s not unusual for them to be back in their nest (or a neighbor’s nest). Young that have already fledged will typically fly when their compartments are opened. This is nothing to worry about — their survival will not be compromised. On the other hand, a bird that truly does fledge prematurely, will often flutter to the ground, and can be caught and returned to its nest. Put it back head first through the entrance hole. If it comes out again, plug the hole with a paper cup, rag, or door plug. Leave

the plug in the entrance for about 3-5 minutes to give the brood a chance to calm down. Remove the plug before gently raising the house. If you’ll follow these suggestions, you’ll rarely have a problem. These techniques work with all types of housing, even those where opening one door exposes multiple nests, simultaneously.

Landlords who stop doing nest checks before the young fledge will not have the slightest clue as to the final outcome of any given nest. So don’t be afraid to continue your checks right up through the very end of the nesting season. The accuracy of your records and the ultimate success of Project Martinwatch depend on it. We hope that every PMCA member will participate in this valuable project.]



A properly-completed Project Martinwatch data sheet. Note that there is an entry in every box, on every inspection date, and that checks were continued until every nest had fledged in order to verify there were no dead nestlings.