

PURPLE MARTIN

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A subadult and adult male Purple Martin exhibiting unusual tameness as they land to be hand fed crickets during martin-killing weather in New Jersey

Saving a New Jersey Purple Martin Colony Using Supplemental Feeding

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My colony of Purple Martins is located in *Dale's Marina, a Sanzari Company*, in Bay Head, New Jersey (see Fig. 2). Like many of you, I have read about cricket tossing as a method to help save starving Purple Martins, but I have never actually tried it until this past May, 2003. This is how it happened.

Friday May 23, 2003: There was a cold northeast wind blowing, with rain and drizzle. This was the 3rd day in a row of cold and rain. I noticed that my 20 pairs of martins were perched on two wooden lounge chairs on the neighbor's dock and although they were sheltered from the cold wind, they looked wet and forlorn (Fig. 1). The neighbors told me that the martins had been there for a couple of days now. If there was ever going to be a good time to try cricket tossing it was now! But this was serious; the forecast for Memorial Day weekend at the Jersey shore was bad. The next three days called for more cold weather with rain and northeast winds. This was a typical Nor'easter and I knew that my martins would be in deep trouble if they did not respond to the crickets because they had already had gone a few days without food. I make some phone calls and found a pet store nearby that sold 1000 large crickets for \$25.00. I also bought a 3-foot-long piece of 3/8th inch plastic tubing used for aquariums. My plan was to shoot



Fig. 1



Fig. 2

Fig. 1: Two wooden lounge chairs on the dock near Pendino's martin houses, covered with weather-stressed Purple Martins.

Fig. 2: One of Stephen Pendino's martin houses mounted on docks in *Dale's Marina, a Sanzari Company*. Note the droopy wings on the birds, a sure sign of weather stress.

the crickets past the martins blowgun-style as they sat atop their houses in the hope that they would see them and perhaps catch a few (Figs. 2, 3, and 5). My martin houses are on a dock surrounded by water, so shooting the crickets is a one-shot deal; if the birds don't catch the crickets, the crickets were going to end up in the water.

To begin, I deliberately scared the birds off of the neighbor's chairs and they landed on the perches on top of their houses; the perfect spot to present some air born crickets. I shot 15 or so crickets through my homemade blowgun with no reaction, except for some strange looks from some of the people on the dock! Then one of the older male martins chased one of the crickets through the air, but missed it. I tried another shot in his direction and he caught it! He also caught the next one. Hey this really works! A few more shots and all the martins got the idea and were catching and eating crickets! They were so excited to have food that they were crashing into each other while trying to catch the crickets (Fig. 3). I tried shooting 4-5 crickets at a time and they caught them all! I called my sister and she came over to help. We couldn't load crickets into the tube fast enough, so I started tossing them by hand. I discovered that hand-tossing was a much faster technique. As my arm tired out and my

throws got weaker and weaker, the martins caught the insects closer and closer to my hands. Pretty soon they were feeding right at eye level! I used a digital camera and tried to get some pictures of the martins eating the crickets in the air. I fed the martins at least 300 crickets that first afternoon. I could hardly wait to feed them again the next day!

Saturday May 24, 2003: It was cold and wet as I fed the birds again by hand, tossing the crickets. This time I mixed in some pieces of scrambled egg and I saw one or two ASY males eat some egg pieces, but the rest of the martins ignored it; they just wanted the crickets. After three years of tending to these birds and now feeding them, they seemed to be getting very friendly with me! A few of them landed on the pilings and the docks within a few feet of me and I was able to take some interesting close-up pictures of various martin plumages while I fed them (see the four images on the bottom of pages 6-7. Note the droopy wings of the ASY-F, a sure sign of a weather-stressed Purple Martin). I could have fed them the rest of the crickets I had, but I decided to ration them so they would last at least one more day. I ordered more crickets on-line, but because of the Memorial Day weekend, they couldn't be delivered until Wednesday, which was a long four-day wait.

Sunday May 25, 2003: The cold and drizzle continued and the birds slept in as they usually do in this kind of weather. Later that morning when they came out of their



Fig. 3

Fig. 3: A composite photo of martins hovering to catch blowgunned crickets.



Fig. 4: A male martin landed on the head of Stephen's neighbor.

Fig. 4

Fig. 5: The cricket blowgun used by Stephen Pendino.

Fig. 6: A drenched female martin being warmed in front of the heater in Stephen's truck.



Fig. 5

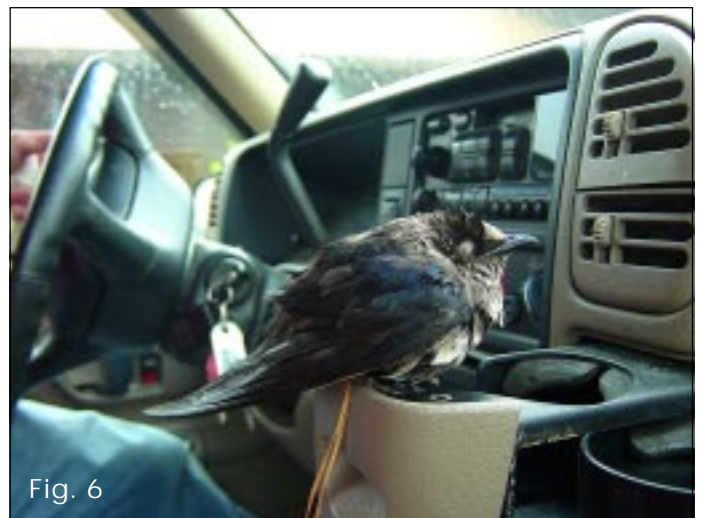


Fig. 6



Fig. 7



Fig. 8



Fig. 9

houses and saw me in another part of the marina, a few of them that recognized me came right over and landed next to me as if insisting they be fed! One even landed on my head, then she tried to land on someone else's shoulder! In reality, they behaved this way because they are starving. I wanted to keep a defined feeding area so I moved over by their houses and threw crickets by hand again and the birds went crazy! It seemed like they could eat nonstop. I was quickly running out of crickets so I alternated shooting crickets and eggs through the blowgun. That seemed to get their attention and they really started eating the eggs too! For the first time, they ate a lot of egg pieces along with the last of my 1000 crickets. My martins seemed to be doing okay for today, but the forecast for Monday called for temperatures in the low 50's, strong winds and heavy rain until late afternoon; this was the very last thing I wanted to hear.

Monday May 26, 2003: At 7 AM it was cold, windy and raining heavily when I saw a lone martin struggling down in the cold bay water under the martin houses. I grabbed a crab net and quietly tiptoed out the dock being careful not to scare any more of the martins out of the houses and out into the rain. I managed to retrieve the adult female without disturbing the colony, but she looked hopeless. She was wet and cold to the touch as I rushed her to my house where I tried warming her with a hair dryer as a last resort. I worried that with the noise and the heat she would go into shock and would surely die. But after I dried her off and let her sit for a few hours, she ate some small crickets on her own! I went back to the marina around 10 AM while it was still raining heavily and I immediately saw another martin in the water and rescued her with the net. I also noticed a seagull eating a dead martin on a nearby dock, while another gull picked one out of the water and flew away with it. My martins were dying of starvation and predation right before my eyes! I wondered how many had died this way during the past two hours this morning. I wondered if there were any martins left inside the houses since I didn't see any heads sticking out. From a distance, I noticed a wing tip or something sticking out of one of the gourds. Through the binoculars I could see that the PVC pipe holding that gourd was bending. It must have been full of communally-roosting martins! The rain was due to stop around 3 PM, but I had no crickets left. It was Memorial Day, but after a

Fig. 7: A banded ASY-M Purple Martin that the author lured closer to the camera with a cricket so he could try to photograph the band for possible later identification. Note the scrambled egg on the dock in the background.

Fig. 8: An adult female (left) and subadult male (right) coming close to the author to be hand fed crickets.

Fig. 9: A subadult female Purple Martin taking all but the leg of a cricket from Stephen's right hand. He took the digital photo with his left hand.

bunch of frantic phone calls, I found a pet store 20 miles away that was open and had 1000 large crickets for \$20.00! I made the drive, bought the crickets, and stopped at home on the way back. I scrambled some eggs, added some water to them, and cooked them in the microwave. Then I armed myself with raingear, my cricket blowgun, a digital camera, crickets and eggs.

At 3 PM, just as predicted, the rain stopped, but the wind was blowing and gusting as I begin feeding. The martins were weakened from starvation and the strong winds knocked many more into the cold water. I rescued three more live birds out of the bay. They were wet and cold, but I didn't have time to run home to use the hair dryer so I placed them in a bucket with some pine needles, started my truck, and put the heat on high. I alternated the birds one by one on my drink holder in front of the heat vent inside the truck to warm them quicker and it worked (see Fig 6)! The birds I fished from the bay waters were so cold and wet that they just sat there until they were dry. Sadly, I also found four dead martins floating in the bay and checked them for leg bands.

The wind died down a bit while I was throwing the crickets and eggs. Not surprisingly, my arms were sore from days of tossing, so I wasn't throwing the crickets very high at all. Undeterred, the martins kept coming closer and closer to me for food hand-outs. I tried to have some martins take a cricket right out of my fingers and a few of the birds did so by hovering within inches of my outstretched hand. I knew I had to get a picture of this! Right after that, I just held my hand out and the two male martins that you see pictured on the front cover of this Update landed on it and I took their picture, I was amazed! I think it was a combination of the wind while I was feeding the birds and the trust they had developed with me over the past few days. They must know they are in good hands! A few of them even tried to land on my head again! When a neighbor came over, an ASY male landed on his hat (see Fig 4)! Then another martin joined him! I took so many digital pictures today that I filled the camera up and had to run home to download the images to the computer.

While I was gone, the martins landed on the dock and picked up every little piece of scrambled egg that was scattered there. So I spread more egg pieces on the dock and knelt down. A female martin walked right up to me and took crickets, eggs and mega mealworms right from my fingers (Fig. 9). Then she took an interest in the mealworm container (Fig. 11) and decided to try the worms on her

Fig. 10: An adult female Purple Martin so hungry that she took scrambled egg right from an outstretched hand.

Fig. 11: An adult female helping herself to the mealworms the author had in a cup at his feet.

Fig. 12: A subadult male Purple Martin taking crickets and scrambled egg from a paper plate placed on the boat dock by Stephen Pendino.



Fig. 10

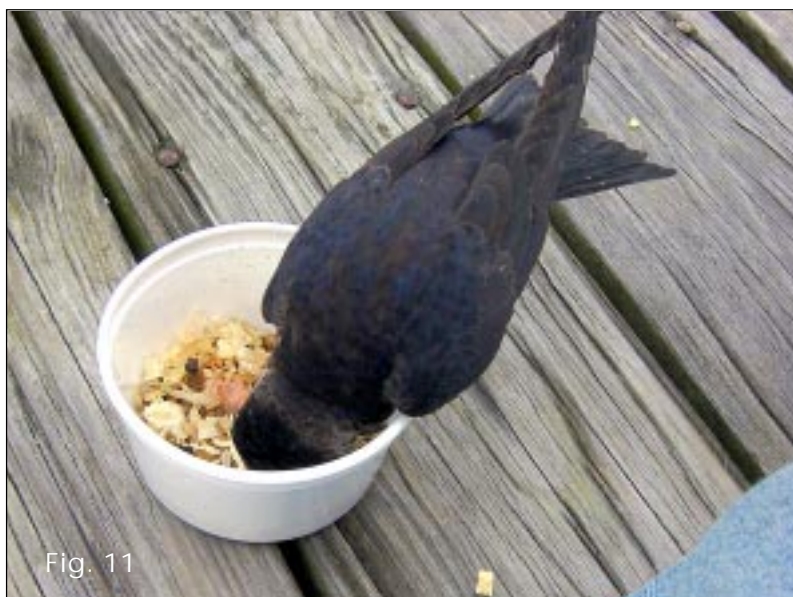


Fig. 11



Fig. 12

Continued from page 5

own, just inches from my feet! She was exceptionally curious and friendly, acting just like a little puppy. I noticed that a banded male had landed on the dock nearby so I tried to lure him close to my camera in an attempt to read the band numbers from the images later (see Fig. 7). Every time I placed a cricket nearby to lure him closer, the 'puppy' tried to run out to get the cricket! I kept grabbing her and putting her behind me so she couldn't see what I was doing. I even told her in a firm voice to sit and stay! She never tried to fly away even after I grabbed her several times. She was already full of crickets, worms,

and egg, so eventually she became content just standing close by and watching me. More and more martins came close to me and ate crickets and eggs from my fingers! This was incredible!

The SuperGourd that I noticed this morning still had wingtips and tails motionlessly sticking out of the entrance hole during the whole time I was feeding this afternoon. I felt that it was time to check the houses for the first time after this week of bad weather. I feared the worst as I slowly and carefully lowered the housing to check for dead and weak-



Fig 13: A communal cavity roost of about a dozen Purple Martins that formed inside a single plastic SuperGourd during prolonged bad weather in 2003 in New Jersey. Photograph was taken through access door.

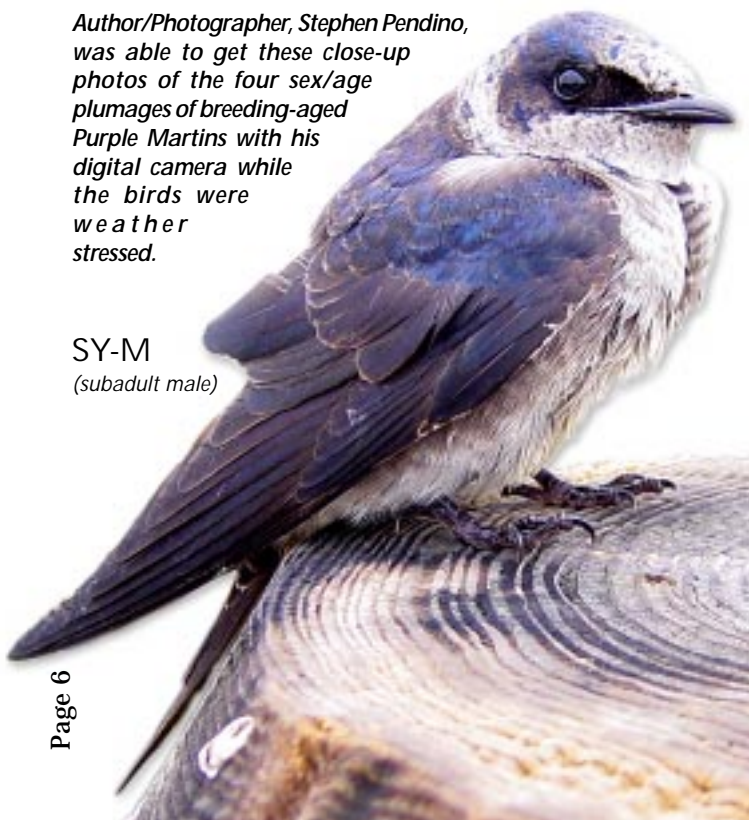
ened birds. The wings and tails sticking out of the SuperGourd entrance hole did not move as I slowly unscrewed the access cover to the gourd. To my surprise as I looked inside (Fig. 13, I saw many adult martins huddled together staring back at me! With my camera ready, I took some pictures before replacing the cover. Then, with the house still down, they flew out, one by one. Luckily they were all able to clear the cold water and fly away. I wasn't sure if any of these birds had even participated in the cricket feeding. I also wondered if they were mine, or from someone else's colony and

had just come for the shelter and warmth. I found one dead male on the bottom of that SuperGourd and two more in another.

The birds from that gourd flew off to the west and out of sight. Before I left for the evening, I saw wingtips sticking out of that same gourd again as it got dark and the cold wind continued. I brought the rescued birds inside my house to keep them warm for the night, placing them inside a SuperGourd so they would feel safe and secure. Most of them ate crickets on their own when I put them in a 'feeding bucket'

Author/Photographer, Stephen Pendino, was able to get these close-up photos of the four sex/age plumages of breeding-aged Purple Martins with his digital camera while the birds were weather stressed.

SY-M
(subadult male)



ASY-F
(adult female)



with some small crickets. One banded male died during the night. He was just too far gone when I rescued him.

Tuesday May 27, 2003: At last the bad weather is behind us and the sun came out, but I continued to feed the martins at the colony this morning by tossing crickets and eggs. I had my rescued birds with me. Not knowing if they had been knocked into the water by the wind, or if they were too weak to fly, I tried releasing them after letting them gorge on crickets all morning. Luckily, three of them flew away with ease. The last one, a female, flew a short way and crashed into the cold bay waters again. I rescued her for the second time and kept her for one more night before taking her to a bird rehabber in my area. This female martin was held and taken care of for about 10 days then was released to join my colony once again!

Overview: Many martin colonies in my area suffered severe losses during this stretch of bad weather. After trying and succeeding in teaching my own martins to respond to the crickets and scrambled eggs, I was able to save over 75% of them. Having done this in what turned out to be an



Fig. 14: Author, Stephen Pendino, brought a few weakened martins he was able to hand capture inside for the night so they would be warm. Most of them ate crickets on their own when he placed them inside a 'feeding bucket,' filled with crickets.

emergency situation, I strongly urge everyone who is a Purple Martin landlord to make an attempt to feed their birds when they have the right conditions. These conditions could be as little as a day or two of rain, fog, and/or cold weather. You don't have to use a blow gun because a plastic spoon or sling shot (or hand tossing) works just as well. Read more about cricket tossing in the PMCA's on-line Forum Archives. It really works and it is not hard to do at all. As a bonus, you may experience a nice interaction with your birds like I did. Train your birds to eat crickets and eggs before they are in trouble from impending bad weather. If you don't, the next time it could be your martins that starve and die.

Stephen Pendino, Jr. is 46 years old and has been a manager at Dale's Marina in Bay Head, New Jersey, for 22 years. He enjoys snow skiing, fishing, bowhunting, and spending time with his 19-year-old son, Stephen David. This will be his fourth year as a Purple Martin landlord. He uses SuperGourds and homemade houses of his own design. He took all the photographs used in this article.



ASY-M
(adult male)



SY-F
(subadult female)