

—CALL THE MEDIA— THE MARTINS ARE HERE!



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As a public relations professional, I've spent much of my career "pitching" stories to the media on everything from quality control at a fast food chicken chain (hint—I used to live in Kentucky) to stories about financial services, to health care and even ski resorts.

Now self-employed, I've had more time to devote to Purple Martins—and can't resist a few "pitch calls" to generate press for these beautiful swallows.

Getting news coverage for Purple Martins can raise public awareness about the use of proactive techniques to help these birds to thrive. That in itself is a good "news hook"—to help get coverage—and a trend that I hope is accelerating.

Securing headlines in the newspaper as well as on TV involves basic sales. Many stories you read about in the newspaper or see on TV begin with some PR person calling the media. You don't have to be pushy or even outgoing. (I'm neither.) You just have to believe in your product and be persistent.

Landlords reading this likely are already advocates for martins in their own back yards, and sometimes for colonies in public places such as parks and schools. Here are a few tips on how you can generate "ink" for your efforts and help to educate others.

First, remember that local news is still pretty local. An old adage in journalism school goes something like, "*Readers are*

more interested in the green snake that Mrs. Jones found in her yard than about a regime change in a third world country."

Local media is indeed interested in doing stories about first arriving martins in the spring, about very large colonies and about innovations such as better housing to help colonies grow.

Smaller town newspapers are the most accessible to contact. If you've got a thriving colony, pick up the phone when the scouts begin to arrive, call the newspaper and ask to speak to the newsroom. Make a suggestion for a story or feature photo that heralds the arrival of spring.

In larger communities, target the "community news" department of the paper with a phone call or an email. The editor and contact information is often listed in that particular section of the newspaper. If you are uncertain who to talk to, call the general newsroom and ask. I usually send an email first, but sometimes calling first and sending additional information by email works well.

Local TV news can be the toughest sell, especially in metro markets. But often there's a particular show, such as a garden or nature-oriented segment, where a story about Purple Martins may fit in quite nicely. View different programs for what kinds of content they include to get an idea whether the producers would be open to a story about martins.

Sometimes local TV news also will take video of "signs of spring" to run as a weather backdrop or as credits are rolling





Two of projects John Miller has undertaken are putting up and managing housing at Forest Park in St. Louis, at left, as well as assisting with martin attraction efforts at the Park's Probstein Golf Course, shown above, where housing has been erected for martins as well as for Wood Ducks and bluebirds.

at the end of a newscast. Just call or email the news desk and suggest a "video feature" on your martins.

Be persistent. Many times I've heard folks say of contacting the media, "*I sent them an email and they never responded.*" Do you know they read it? Did they really know just how cool a Purple Martin really is?

Part of the "pitch"—maybe just a note—should be that "*this is a swallow that's cherished by over one million landlords in the eastern U.S.*" You could add something like, "*many new techniques are helping landlords to attract and manage these birds.*" Keep it brief—this is a tease to get them interested.

One may have to pursue a good bit of follow up to actually "place" a story. You don't want to annoy editors, but it's very appropriate to phone to make sure they received your email (old fashioned mail still works, too, and gives them a piece of paper to review), to offer to briefly explain its significance or to remind them—perhaps a week later—that "*more birds are arriving—it's really something to see!*"

Colony sites in public places are almost sure bets for news coverage. The fact that it's at a school or a park adds news value—likewise for landlords who host open houses at their colony sites or at public forums such as garden or bird clubs.

But even in your own back yard, don't forget the anecdote about the green snake. Readers really want to know about the big colony over at Joe's (or Emil's or Steve K's) place.

One technique I use in calling—either initially or as a follow up—is to ask the reporter or editor if I can have "*30 seconds*" to suggest a story. Unless they are truly on deadline, they almost always grudgingly say, "*okay.*" I really do stop at about 30 seconds, at which point they hopefully ask a ques-

tion and we can talk for a few minutes about why readers or viewers would be interested.

Professional PR types usually write a press release that contains more details. For martins, I'd suggest a fact sheet with background about their biology and management techniques. Now, don't panic. Just print out the download sheet on "Attracting Purple Martins" at www.purplemartin.org. It's a ready-made fact sheet you can provide to the media.

When a reporter arrives at your site, be diplomatic in your statements. We'll generate more goodwill by referring to "managed" and "unmanaged" colonies than by using words like "slum lords."

Try to stick to a central message. Tell the reporter about how this is a species that's totally dependent on us for housing, but that a "martin house" or a gourd rack is a pretty unnatural state. So, letting nature take its course isn't a viable way to help these birds thrive.

Stay on track. Don't muddy the water with conversations about unrelated topics—it leads to errors in the story later. You can

refer the reporter to the fact sheet for questions about martin biology, and to the PMCA staff.

Just before the reporter leaves, you want to emphasize something like: "*Martins do breed successfully enough in unmanaged colonies that some manage to return every year. But to thrive and grow, colonies really need a helping hand from us to keep nest competitors away, to control mites and other insects that reduce fledgling success, and to minimize as much as possible any risk from predators.*"

Now, the above is a mouthful. But you know the message: proactive management. Just put it in your own words.

You also can offer to be available to answer any further questions or to clarify facts. It's not protocol to ask to review copy, but is genuinely helpful to be accessible for fact checks, and often reporters will call to double check things.

And—get in a big plug for the PMCA. Remind the reporter that readers or viewers can learn more by visiting www.purplemartin.org. Very often the newspaper or TV news are happy to include and even highlight this information.

Finally, sit back and feel good about the news coverage. You'll likely get some well-deserved recognition for yourself, and you will have gone well beyond your own colony site in spreading the word about techniques that can help keep these beautiful swallows around for generations to come.

John Miller is helping to establish martin colonies in Forest Park, St. Louis, Mo., where as a self-employed publicist he has generated extensive news coverage about those efforts in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, KMOV-TV, the local website of the St. Louis Audubon Society and with a pending article in Missouri Conservationist magazine.

