

Coping with Avian Predators at Purple Martin Colonies

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Spring is an exciting and busy time of year for the Purple Martin landlord. Housing is readied, and even before martins arrive, many landlords begin controlling House Sparrows and European Starlings. Although these two species technically are not avian predators, they are aggressive competitors for the martins' nesting compartments. They are non-native species, and are not protected by law. If not controlled, House Sparrows and European Starlings can disrupt or ruin a martin colony. Several options for controlling them are available to the martin landlord, and *PMCA* and many others recommend their use.

True avian predators, those birds that prey naturally on Purple Martins for food, include several species of our native falcons, owls, and hawks. Falcons are superb avian predators that feed frequently or exclusively on birds, but they usually are not a threat at martin colonies. The Merlin, Prairie Falcon and Gyrfalcon nest mostly outside the range of the Purple Martin. The Peregrine Falcon, with its spectacular aerial skills, could be a serious predator of martins, were it not relatively rare. Our smallest falcon, the American Kestrel, is too small to pose a serious threat to Purple Martins.

Owls and hawks are more of a threat to martins. They are widespread throughout the breeding range of the Purple Martin, and they can seriously disrupt a martin colony when they key in on it as a source of food. Fortunately, this does not happen at most martin colonies, but when it does, landlords usually seek protective measures.

Owls are easier to cope with than hawks. The Great Horned Owl and Barred Owl, both large owls with continent-wide ranges, are the owls most likely to attack martins. The smaller Screech Owl has been known to prey on martins, but more often is a competitor for nest compartments. Owls are primarily nocturnal predators, visiting martin colonies under the cover of darkness. They take birds directly from nest compartments, and they capture birds that have flushed from the compartment. Fortunately for martins and their landlords, protective measures are readily avail-

able in the form of owl guards. Several manufacturers of martin houses offer effective, barrier-type, owl guards as optional equipment. Some guards and houses, by design, also protect the birds by making it difficult for the owl to reach the birds inside. Where owls are a likely threat, *PMCA* recommends that landlords install owl guards before attacks begin.

The Accipiter hawks, particularly the Sharp-shinned Hawk and the Cooper's Hawk, are the two hawk species most likely to attack martins. They are diurnal predators, and one look at their long toes and talons is enough to convince anyone that these are birds adapted to catch and eat other birds. They catch unwary martins in the air or pick them off perches.

Unfortunately, there are no effective barriers to hawks, making them the most problematic avian predator at a martin colony. Where practical, locating martin housing out in the open and away from woods (the normal habitat of Accipiter hawks) can help prevent successful attacks. With enough warning time, martins can often evade the hawk, or counterattack with mobbing behavior. However, once Sharpies and Cooper's key in on a colony and learn to take martins, there is little that the landlord can do deter them, short of spending a lot of time in the colony chasing off the offending birds.

No landlord likes to see any of his or her birds taken by hawks. How does one cope, then? Many cope with hawk predation attitudinally by taking a holistic view of nature, accepting predation as natural phenomenon, and not blaming the hawk for following its instincts and being attracted to a concentrated source of food. Some landlords, however, find it difficult to cope in this way, and they believe that taking direct actions against hawks, including shooting, is justified to save martins. *PMCA* strongly opposes this point of view for two reasons

First, it is against the law to shoot or otherwise harm



Photo © Patrick Williams

An adult Cooper's Hawk (*Accipiter cooperii*), one of the two species of Accipiter hawks that most often pose a threat to Purple Martins.

hawks, owls and other birds of prey. The most applicable law is the federal Migratory Bird Treaty Act of 1918, and its subsequent Amendments. The Act, and the implementing regulations found in 50 Code of Federal Regulations, Parts 10, 13 and 21, are very clear on the matter. Unless specifically permitted, "take" of migratory birds is prohibited, and "take" is defined to include shooting, wounding and trapping. Although the federal law is preeminent and comprehensive, most states have additional laws that protect birds of prey and other migratory birds.

The second, equally important reason that PMCA opposes direct action against avian predators is based on conservation principles. Conservation is the heart of the PMCA mission. Our mission and our credibility will be enhanced if, while focusing on the Purple Martin, we are allied with others in broader efforts to conserve all native migratory birds and their habitats. This is the reason that PMCA is a member of the *Bird Conservation Alliance*, a network of organizations united for the conservation of birds. The *Alliance* also includes many fine organizations like *Hawkwatch International* and the *Raptor Research Foundation* that are dedicated to the conservation of birds of prey. Birds of prey are an important part of our natural environment, and many, including the Cooper's and Sharp-shinned Hawks, have special conservation needs.

It is important that whether we love Purple Martins, birds of prey, or hopefully both, we stand together to protect all of our native migratory birds and their habitats. If you are a Purple Martin landlord, you have already demonstrated your stewardship and generosity toward birds. We hope that you will extend these values to other native species, even those that prey on martins. By all means, avail yourself of protective devices like owl excluders, and protect your martins to the extent permitted by law. But if these measures fail, cope with avian predation by accepting it as a natural

process, and by knowing that the martins have coped with it for eons.

For more information on birds of prey, visit the following web sites:

Hawk Migration Association of North America: <http://www.hmana.org/>

Hawk Mountain Sanctuary Association: <http://www.hawkmountain.org/default.shtml>

Hawkwatch International: <http://www.hawkwatch.org/>

Raptor Research Foundation: <http://biology.boisestate.edu/raptor/>

Canadian Wildlife Service: <http://www.hww.ca/hww2.asp?id=48>



Photo © Cindy Mead <www.northwoodsong.com>



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Top: An adult Sharp-shinned Hawk (*Accipiter striatus*), the smaller accipiter hawk familiar to many landlords. Placing martin housing in the most open location available, as far from trees as possible, can help martins spot hawks in time to evade them. **Below:** A martin house that has been equipped with owl guards to help deter predation attempts by owls.

The Bird Conservation Alliance web site is a good source of information on issues & organizations involved with bird conservation. <http://www.birdconservationalliance.org/index.htm>

Editor's Note: See the back cover of this issue of the *Purple Martin Update*. Crescent-shaped entrances on martin houses and gourds are an effective deterrent to Screech Owls as well European Starlings.

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