Resisting Extinction: Purple Martins, Death, and the Future

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Abstract
As a result of anthropogenically induced habitat destruction and climate change, the Eastern Purple Martin in North America has been transformed into a “backyard bird,” dependent on a network of “lanslords” for nesting structures and protection from competitor species. While the orthodox approach to wildlife conservation tends to promote the continued existence of appropriate habitats, the conservation of the Eastern Purple Martin has hinged upon the continued existence of a specific human cultural behaviour. This landlordling subculture, however, is now believed to be waning due to the aging demographics of the landlords themselves, threatening the long-term survival of the species. This article focuses on the relationships between 24 landlords—primarily older, white, southern US men—and their avian charges. The long-term bond between the birds and their human keepers meant that the landlords were confronting not only their own mortality but also the extinction of the birds to which they have devoted themselves. Their continuing struggles to recruit younger generations into landlordling suggest the need for new models of martin conservation that can appeal to the post-domestic and internet savvy sensibilities of today’s youth.

Keywords: Purple Martins, Purple Martin landlords, conservation, death anxiety, aging, gender, human-animal interaction

INTRODUCTION
Eastern Purple Martins (\textit{Progne subis}), while wild birds, are notable among the birds of North America for their tendency to associate with humans. Martins are “synanthropes,” i.e., species that prefer to dwell in close proximity to humans. The martin population as a whole is believed by some to have benefited from its close association with humanity (Brown and Tarof 2013), but the species’ survival depends on a subculture of aging “Purple Martin landlords” whose tradition may also be in decline. The martin appears to exist at what van Dooren (van Dooren 2014: 10) termed the “edges of extinction” despite the fact that the species is not one about which the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN 2017) or the US Fish and Wildlife Service (US Fish and Wildlife Service 2017b) are currently concerned.

The Purple Martin is a large species of swallow with a breeding range that includes most of the United States east of the Rocky Mountains and southern Canada, extending west into Alberta; its wintering range encompasses most of Brazil. This research focuses on most of the species’ range in eastern USA, which contains the vast majority of individuals, but there are several small and disparate populations in western USA that are classified as different subspecies and are less dependent on people (\textit{P. s. hesperia} and \textit{P. s. arboricola}) (Tarof and Brown 2013a). Eastern Purple Martins are somewhat
unique in their nearly total dependence on landlords during the breeding season. These landlords provide housing and protection from competitor species, and it is exceedingly rare to find any member of the Eastern subspecies of Purple Martins breeding in anything other than a human-provided nesting structure. Given the central role humans currently play in sustaining the martin population, our research sought to understand relationships between landlords and the birds for which they cared, with a particular focus on what motivates landlords to engage in this activity. We found that given the long-term bonds between the birds and their human keepers, landlords became aware of how their own mortality was tied to the fates of the birds, heightening their concern for the future of landlording as well as their frustrations with trying to engage younger people in their avocation.

**Purple Martin Populations and the Rise of the “Landlording Tradition”**

Prior to the rise of the landlording as it exists today, Eastern Purple Martins nested in abandoned woodpecker cavities or other natural nesting structures, as smaller populations in the west still do (Tarof and Brown 2013b). A widespread belief exists among martin enthusiasts that pre-contact Native Americans provided hollow gourd houses for martins in the vicinity of their fields (Wilson et al. 1831, Hill 1987). While detailed historical work to confirm this notion remains to be done, a nineteenth century ethnographic account indicates that pre-contact Native people deliberately sought to attract martins to drive off crows and blackbirds at planting time and reduce insect damage to crops (Tabler); an account by an eighteenth century fur trader suggests martins’ dried and powdered bodies were used by indigenous people to preserve furs from insect damage (Hill 1987). In 1808, Chickasaws and Choctaws were observed hanging gourds for martins on stripped saplings near their cabins, as were African Americans on long canes on the banks of the Mississippi (Wilson et al. 1831). Martins were said to be housed in everything from makeshift accommodations rigged into roofs and signposts to large houses with multiple “apartments” (Wilson et al. 1831). Thus, it appears that the tradition of providing housing for martins was well established in the USA by at least the early nineteenth century.

In 1883, the J. Warren Jacobs Co. became the first commercial manufacturer of martin houses in the USA, producing elaborate structures that looked like multi-story homes or prominent buildings “complemented by broad porches, railings, and ornate window treatments” (Jacobs Birdhouse Company 2018).

European colonisation of the Americas and its aftermath brought anthropogenic changes that had a detrimental impact on the martin population. Despite the identification of some “primitive nests” in the martin’s eastern range into the 1930s (Sprunt 1963), by 1900, degradation of habitat and the introduction and spread of non-native species such as European Starlings induced nearly complete dependence on human-constructed martin houses for breeding (Tarof and Brown 2013b; Hunn 1982). Adverse weather also severely impacted martin populations, resulting in regular die offs that produced substantial mortality (Brown and Tarof 2013). The result of these factors has been a significant long-term decline in the martin’s population across their range in North America (Peterjohn and Sauer 1995; Brown and Tarof 2013; Ray under review-a; Sauer et al. 2017). Additionally, martins continue to face threats from global climate change (Connor 2015). Despite these troubling signs, the conservation status of the Purple Martin is currently listed as “least concern” (IUCN 2017). With so many species around the globe disappearing at a rapid rate (Ripple et al. 2017), the martin seems to be flourishing by comparison.

Generations of Americans have known martins as a “backyard bird,” and the associated hobby of landlording “...has spawned a flood of literature on the species, a profitable industry in birdhouse manufacturing, and two national organisations in which martin enthusiasts regularly communicate their observations via newsletters” (Brown and Tarof 2013). Contemporary martin housing can range from a single natural gourd to elaborate colonies comprised of numerous specialised synthetic gourds and multiple-compartment houses (Figure 1) with higher-end, Amish-constructed apartments costing upwards of $1000. Much of the more elaborate colony housing is provided by a network of self-proclaimed “landlords,” many of whom are affiliated with the Purple Martin Conservation Association (PMCA) (Purple Martin Conservation Association 2017). Founded in 1987, the PMCA is a non-profit citizen-scientist
organisation that advocates for martin stewardship through their website, social media (e.g., Facebook), local and national meetings, and a mentorship programme. Despite these efforts, however, many landlords believe that martin stewardship is waning, due in large part to the older demographics of landlords themselves. One study of landlords in Texas and Oklahoma, for instance, found that nearly 90% of landlords were aged 50 or older, with the largest group in their ’70s (Kay 2012).

Purple Martins present a seemingly unique conservation scenario in which the persistence of a species is less dependent on its own demographics than on the demographics of a small subset of the human population. However, these dynamics may be becoming increasingly common as humans now control so much of the pattern and process in the environment that most threatened and endangered species depend on our conservation actions and are, therefore, vulnerable to our decisions about whether to continue them. In this sense, martins represent a core dilemma in modern conservation.

While the Purple Martin is threatened by many of the same forces impacting other species, including loss of habitat (particularly in its South American wintering grounds) (Michel et al. 2016; Nebel et al. 2010) and competition from invasive species, its future is made even more precarious because of its unique nesting behaviour. The extinction danger is especially real if, as some have argued, the martins’ strongly ingrained association with humans is likely to prevent them from reverting to nesting in natural cavities or in anthropogenic structures other than human-provided bird housing (Ray under review–b). While a common approach to wildlife conservation promotes the continued existence of appropriate habitats, the conservation of the Eastern Purple Martin may hinge upon the continued existence of a specific human behaviour.

Conservation and Death Anxiety

While our study did not originally set out to examine death, mortality emerged as a persistent theme. Arguably, discussions about species conservation are always ultimately about avoiding mortality at the species level but here the mortality of the species was bound up, as well, with that of individual landlords. Death anxiety, said to be a human universal (Becker 1973), is a “negative emotional reaction provoked by the anticipation of a state in which the self does not exist” (Tomer and Eliason 1996). According to Becker (1973),

“It is a terrifying dilemma to be in and to have to live with... but to live a whole lifetime with the fate of death haunting one’s dreams and even the most sun-filled days—that’s something else. If you only let the full weight of this paradox sink down on your mind and feelings you realize what an impossible situation it is for an animal to be in. I believe that those who speculate that a full apprehension of man’s condition would drive him insane are right, quite literally right” (Becker 1973: 26).

Mortality salience occurs in situations that remind us of our own mortality or make it seem more plausible (Solomon et al. 1991), and we grapple with this awareness via our cultural meaning systems and through our efforts to contribute to the future, to achieve what has come to be called symbolic immortality (Lifton 1973; Lifton and Olson 2004; Becker 1973). This process generally is believed to operate below the level of conscious awareness, since mortality salience is thought to be too terrifying to maintain as a focal part of our awareness (Greenberg et al. 1994). We argue here that the challenges of ensuring that martin landlording would continue as a tradition forced individual landlords to face their own mortality, and its implications for their life project, in very direct and conscious ways.

Proposed initially by Becker (Becker 1973) and then confirmed in experimental psychology lab studies (Parry 2015), increased mortality salience is argued to lead humans to differentiate ourselves from other animals and with nature itself, as these remind us of our own “creatureliness,” meaning our own biological and thus mortal nature (Goldenberg et al. 2001; Marino and Mountain 2015). But the dynamics of martin landlording complicate these ideas: in landlords, we encounter a group of individuals whose contribution to the future is intimately connected with creatureliness and nature and whose project reminds them on a regular basis of their own mortality. At the same time, mortality provides a motive force for much of their work.

METHODS

This project came about after the senior author (Bridge, a wildlife biologist) attended a meeting of the PMCA as an invited speaker on using radar to detect martin roosts; there he became aware of the passion and attachment that many landlords felt with regard to their martins. Bridge became convinced that a fuller understanding of the human animal dimensions of landlording would benefit his work on martin conservation, and subsequently engaged Jervis and Spicer, cultural anthropologists working in the area of anthrozoology, to develop an exploratory study on this topic. This project reflects this anthropological-biological collaboration, and is best understood as an initial broad exploration of the landlording phenomena, an attempt to ascertain what drives landlords to engage in this activity and to begin to flesh out the relationships between these wild avians and their human keepers.

This project consisted of 24 semi-structured telephone interviews in 2013 with landlords from across the United States who volunteered to serve as landlord mentors (i.e., providers of help and information for new or prospective landlords) through the PMCA. We strove to obtain a demographically and regionally diverse sample by recruiting an equal number of male and female landlords who represented the various US census regions within the Purple Martins’ breeding range. However, due in large part to the characteristics of those who self-select into mentoring, as well as the regions where Purple Martins breed, our sample was overwhelming male, white, older, and southern (Table 1). The skewed gender of our sample
Table 1
Demographics (N=24)

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<td>South</td>
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*missing data

also reflects the tendency for males, who are overrepresented as landlord mentors in general, to disproportionately volunteer to participate (of the 53 mentors who replied to an email invitation to volunteer for the study, only 3 were women). Interview questions included a description of the participants’ martin housing, history as a landlord, the primary responsibilities of a landlord, motivation for being a landlord, benefits received from interning with martins, factors that limit or constrain their involvement, whether they have received any antagonism or hostility related to their martin housing, views regarding animal rights and welfare, views regarding conservation, and assessment of the future of Purple Martins and landlordship. Interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and subjected to thematic analysis. To protect their identities, all participants are referred to with pseudonyms.

RESULTS

Single-Focus Conservationists

The landlords in our study not only cared for martins, but had taken on the additional responsibility of offering support to new or prospective landlords through mentorship, sharing their knowledge with others who were interested in becoming landlords or who needed advice. As mentors who were involved in the PMCA, these individuals in many ways represented a high level of expertise and commitment, supporting large colonies of martins and devoting considerable time and resources to these birds. Many participants began landlordng at a young age (e.g., 10–12 years old) alongside their fathers or grandfathers, and a few mentioned building martin houses in Boy Scouts or on their own as children. Some of these participants landlordng their “entire lives,” while others returned to it at a later point in their adult life. However, 1/3 of participants became landlords as adults after being exposed to Purple Martins and becoming interested in/fascinated by them. All had extensive landlord experience at the time of the interview, ranging from 6 years to their entire lives. Successful landlordng required regular monitoring and maintenance of housing, in addition to the employment of various “tricks of the trade” that would increase the likelihood of attracting and retaining martins, nesting survival, and fledgling success. Many landlords also participated in citizen-scientist efforts through the PMCA. For instance, to monitor which birds returned from their migration to Brazil, some landlord mentors marked their martins with leg bands.

Participants were generally sympathetic to conservation and were avid outdoorsmen (e.g., hunters and/or fishermen), but they were not members of other birding, bird-related, or wildlife organizations. The majority disassociated themselves from animal welfare and animal rights concerns. In explaining his lack of interest in animal rights, Clarence described his political stance as “just to the left of Rush Limbaugh” (a conservative radio talk show host). A softer position was that of June, one of two women in the study, who stated, “You know, as I’ve gotten older, I’ve evolved too. [I] almost I hate to put it this way, but I have more respect and appreciation for animals and humans. I have gotten a little bit unhappy with the way humanity has abused the natural environment.” In general, the vast majority of participants’ conservation energies focused on Purple Martins alone, often with strong passion. One participant even referred to his mentoring activities as a “little crusade.” This type of single-focus conservation orientation may not be unique, it has been commonly observed among animal conservation activists (Herzog 2011).

Landlords were keenly aware of the need to intervene, maintaining that martins would not thrive without management. As Roger explained:

I believe in animal rights, you know…. but I think all animals should be managed, period. You know, if we could go back a thousand years when everything could live in harmony because we didn’t screw anything up yet, it would be fine, but we’ve manipulated everything so bad now that things got to be managed.

Roger went on to discuss an analogy with animal trapping—including the trapping of wolves (which he participated in)—and which is highly controversial in his area of the country, with some citizens opposed due to concerns about its impact on an animal only recently removed from the endangered species list (Hassan 2012; Krakner 2014). Monroe thought that martins’ current state of dependence on humans was a “very positive thing.” He continued. “The family I grew up in was very conscious of wildlife conservation and—I’m not a tree hugger at all…. knowing that these birds are for the most part dependent on human housing—they obviously did ok before we came, [but] I think everything’s a lot better right now.” Taking it a step further, Donald explained his belief that there is a divine charter for the current state of affairs:

“The Bible tells us that God has given us dominion over all animals,” echoing the “dominion perspective” rooted in the Judeo-Christian tradition (Serpell 1986; Capek 2006), but emphasising human duties rather than rights.
Being a Landlord

Motivations
Landlords described several motivations for landlording. These included, first and foremost, pleasure. They were in awe of the beauty of the birds, as well as the long distance they traversed in their annual migrations to Brazil. Doug shared his delight in this way:

The joy of just having them back. I mean, you’ve gone through... the winter, you know. Just everything’s dead and, you know, people go through that spell of depression.... knowing that these animals that traveled all the way down into South America, into Brazil, knowing that, ‘Hey, they’re coming,’ you know, ‘They’re going to come back, got to prepare.’ It gives you something to look forward to through this, basically this dead period of space, when everything is dead up here.

John went further: “We love sitting out here watching them, and watching all their antics and how beautiful they [are]. You know, they fly—and, I don’t know, it makes me feel like everything is right in my world. If they’re not here.... if they wouldn’t come, I [would] be pretty much sadder.” Along with this joy, however, came obligation, as noted by Buck. “Well, it seemed like I’ve kind of started a commitment where the birds expect me to be here every year,” he said, laughing.

Relationships with Birds
Landlords’ relationships with their birds hinged on the unique characteristics that martins possess, such as allowing humans to touch them without flying away. Martins’ unusual synanthropic nature accounted for much of this uniqueness, with the birds somehow simultaneously wild and yet dependent on humans for survival. Clarence described how trusting the martin could be for a wild bird: “I think you could write poetics about this, but the bird’s songs.... it’s liquid, it’s compelling. They’re such happy birds and they’re glad to see you. They are not afraid of human contact. You get very intimate with them.” Similarly, Pete noted how nice it was to be able to be so close to a wild bird “that recognises you as a non-threat.” A few participants thought of martins as “wild pets.” June observed that the birds “know” their landlords, and stated, “I’d hate to sound probably corny, but it’s a friendship. I mean, they’re backyard pets, without being domesticated, really.” Thus, there was something special about being in such a close relationship with something so wild and yet so completely dependent on you for its very existence. From the (largely male) human perspective provided by these participants, relationships with martins were characterised as uniquely intimate, trusting, and (one-directionally) dependent bonds with wild, beautiful, and awe-inspiring creatures.

The Future

Reluctance to “Do What it Takes.”
The imperative to control ‘introduced species’, such as the European Starling and House Sparrow that threaten martins was seen as a major impediment to attracting newcomers to the avocation. These species were viewed as violent, non-native predators of martins and their innocent babies, and none of the landlord mentors had any qualms about exterminating them. This was referred to as “doing what it takes.” In contrast, many of the younger generation were thought to show a distinct distaste for killing other types of birds. As Bubba stated, “They just, they don’t like to kill anything, you know, so they’re reluctant to do that, and if you don’t do that you’re just not going to be successful nine out of ten times.”

Within the landlord community, deterrence and killing are both part of predator control. Landlords first attempt to deter owls, hawks, and snakes with protective accessories to their housing setups (e.g., bars or mesh cages around nest entrances and baffles on the support poles; keeping trees trimmed to minimise ambush opportunities for hawks). Usual methods for killing competitor birds are destroying eggs and nests, strangling (firmly squeezing birds’ necks for about 10 seconds), “breaking their necks” (e.g., cervical dislocation), or shooting them. While under US law killing non-game native species is illegal, killing invasive species such as House Sparrows and European Starlings is legal. Arguably, these latter birds have been “othered” within the general landlord community, meaning killing them is easily justified. Although it is illegal due their native status, some landlords will shoot hawks that are focused on killing their martins.

The insistence on killing as part of successful landlording may be one reason for the disproportionate male demographics of landlording. That men are more willing to and experienced at killing wild animals is evidenced in a national survey of the US population, which found that the vast majority (90%) of hunters are male (US Fish and Wildlife Service 2017a). In the case of martins, these gender dynamics were made clear in Roger’s discussion of the need for landlords to “control” invasive species.

Some ladies don’t want to kill the sparrows and starlings, you know, even after you’ve told them how destructive they are to other birds and some of the things that the starlings and sparrows will do. They still can’t come to the point of killing, and that’s part of being a Purple Martin landlord too.

When Roger met with resistance to destroying competitor species, he tried to work on mentees’ “emotional side,” telling them how starlings toss live baby martins out of their nests and peck out their eyes.

But a lot of people just don’t have that ability to deal with those sort of natural things that are gonna happen in nature. A sharp shinned hawk comes by and just nails one of your martins when it’s sitting on a perch: what do you do? You know what I mean? It’s just like they’re just going to have to deal with that. You see death. And you know, some of the babies aren’t going to make it, there’s always genetic problems and stuff. No matter what you do, you have to realise that that’s part of the hobby. But I think living in Iowa helps too. A lot of people that live on the farms slaughtering pigs and cattle and stuff, so they just know
that’s part of life. And I think that’s why it’s a little more successful here in the Midwest, whereas you go to some other states, they just see their hamburger [laughs] in the meat market and think it just magically showed up.

As Roger points out, an acceptance of death as part of nature and the need for selective killing to sustain martins is an intrinsic part of the landlord hobby. This acceptance, as well as the ability to carry out selective killing, is not universal. Pete asserted,

I don’t think Purple Martin people—established landlords anyway—are animal welfare type people because, like I said, you have to have almost a cruel streak in you to be a successful martin landlord. Yeah, like I said, to be a successful landlord you got to be willing to kill about anything else that flies up there.

Pete had reached the point where he didn’t want to be a landlord mentor anymore because of the criticism he experienced when recommending that people kill competitors. Non-landlords would ask him, “How could you?” or “Why? You’re a veterinarian. How could you ask me to do this?”

It may be, in fact, that not everyone is cut out to be a landlord as the role is understood by participants. To conserve—that is, to ward off extinction—one must cull introduced species that are out of control, at least as far as landlords were concerned. A hunting and fishing ethos that provides for killing wildlife under certain conditions, combined with the absence of an animal rights ideology that maintains that all animals have intrinsic interests and the right to be in possession of their own lives (Singer 2009; Regan 2004), may make for ideal characteristics for someone who could fulfill the responsibilities of a martin landlord as currently configured. Further, with their appreciation of nature, the spare time that often comes with later life, and not being overly preoccupied by the temptations of the electronic age, these older landlords seemed particularly well-suited to the work. But finding replacements to step into this same niche among the younger generation has not been easy.

Older Landlords, Technology Obsessed Young Folks

A persistent worry among landlords, given the fact that they were getting older, was the future of martins. Many landlords referenced their older demographics as they considered the future of Purple Martins, such as Chuck, who pointed out that “.... probably 90% or better are around retirement age that I deal with, and it is a concern of mine.” This concern struck on two (related) fronts: the home front, as landlords imagined their own colonies in the face of their own deaths—and on a species conservation level, given the dependence of the birds on human nurture. As Monroe put it:

My concern for the future, it would be for the birds. If I’m having to leave this earth—and among the other landlords I’ve grown up to know.... we always talk about it, is what’s going to happen to the future of the martins if a lot of the landlords, like us, pass away. Because, see, a lot of people today either don’t know about the bird because maybe nobody’s run into them and told them about it or they got all these electronic gadgets and devices out now.... a lot of kids aren’t involved in nature like they used to be because they’re so involved in the video games, iPhones, or what have you.

The younger generation’s preoccupation with electronic devices, coupled with their declining interest in nature, was mentioned by a number of landlords, including Ralph:

The biggest problem with the future of landlording is not being able to get our youth and younger generation involved. I don’t know, it would be hard to pick out a percentage. I would say 89% of your martin landlords are your 40, 50, 60 year olds; 70, 80 year olds; the older generation.... I think a lot of it is just the state of the country as far as—one big thing is the electronics, involvement in electronics with our youth. There’s just so many other things for them to do. Whereas years ago, family stayed together, they did things together. A lot of the parents and grandparents had a martin house out in their yard, you know, and they were able to take care of them and enjoy them. Where not everybody is on the go all the time and there’s just no interest to learn about [martins] from the younger generation ‘cause there’s just so many other things going on for them.

Chuck lamented the accelerated pace of life:

It is a definite concern of mine, with the younger generation having the [lack of] interest in the bird....I tell you what, my boy, my kids, they are so busy, on the go. So much of everything is helter-skelter...to take the time to sit out and have that cup of coffee in the morning to watch the birds or that evening--uh uh. You know, it’s such a fast pace everybody’s living now.... I mean, all them birds, what’s going to happen to all these birds?

June found herself “running around [her] state doing all kinds of presentations on the martin” to try to entice new landlords. Others found themselves relying on the very same technologies that they lamented earlier. As Ralph reflected,

We can try and pass it along and keep the tradition of having martins [going], because that’s my biggest concern and worry is what’s going to happen when a lot of us older landlords—you know, I’m only 45 so I’m not that old—but I’m talking to ones that are in their 60s, 70s, and 80s that have lots of martins. What are [the martins] going to do when they pass away? What’s going to happen, you know? So that’s why with the PMCA and Nature Society News still around and maybe some other ones that are out there—with the Forums and Facebook and all that, we keep in contact with a lot of the same landlords and you get a lot of new ones that come in, and then you get a lot of ones that go out, you know, “I don’t want to do this,” “too much trouble,” or what have you.
The image that emerges from these interviews is of a fiercely committed set of individuals aware that their passion may not be shared with the next generation. This makes their awareness of their own mortality doubly painful, for it represents not only the end of their own time on earth, but also raises the very real possibility that the species they have laboured so hard to conserve may also not survive.

CONCLUSION

Despite the dedication of landlords, Purple Martin’s current “least threatened” status could quickly change because of the martin’s dependence on human-provided housing, the aging of current landlords, and the apparent lack of interest by the younger generation. To van Dooren, “...extinction is never a sharp singular event—something that begins, rapidly takes place, and then is over and done with. Rather, the edge of extinction is more often a ‘dull’ one: a slow unraveling of intimately entangled ways of life that begins long before the death of the last individual and continues to ripple forward long afterward, drawing in living beings in a range of different ways” (van Dooren 2014: 12). Landlords resisted this interspecies unraveling, and worked toward a future in which they would be replaced and martins would survive.

The involvement of landlords in martins’ lives and their larger efforts in the conservation of the species brought increased awareness of life’s finitude. This awareness, brought home by many aspects of the avocation itself—the death of baby birds, competitor destruction, even the project of conservation itself—occurred at a time in their own life course where awareness of the inevitability of mortality is typically increasingly realised. Landlords envisioned a day when they would no longer be there to care for their birds, who would eventually return from their long migratory journey to find their homes gone. The thought that no one would be there to take the landlords’ place only intensified their motivation to educate and recruit young people into the avocation, even knowing that many of these efforts were failing to have a substantial impact.

One explanation for the disconnect between landlords’ recruitment efforts and young people’s apparent lack of response can be found in Bulliet’s (2007) ideas regarding societal shifts in human-animal relationships. As Bulliet theorised, most young people in the USA today live in a post-domestic state, which privileges exceedingly close (even familial) relationships with pets, but includes only minimal contact with/awareness of creatures classified as “farm” and “wild” animals. In contrast, humans living in a “domestic” state (e.g., farmers from past generations) were very familiar with all animals but not: sentimental toward them (Bulliet 2007). As one considers post-domestic personhood, one must wonder to what extent a young person, with a beloved dog in the bed, a smart phone as a constant companion, and only a vague sense of the natural world, would want to engage in a hands-on, nature-intensive activity like martin landlording. Moreover, aspects of landlording require engaging in a type of “dirty work” (Hughes 1951; Jervis 2001; Bunderson and Jeffery 2009; Sanders 2010) (e.g., cleaning feces from bird houses, dealing with dead baby birds, and killing competitors) that is at odds with the “clean” inside activities made possible by a post-domestic world.

While the notion that the younger generation are somehow qualitatively—and negatively—different may seem like a cliché, as in the expression, “young people these days” (Irznesniewski and Donnelian 2014), the tenor of the discourse in our study was less of complaint and more of concern. And indeed, there is evidence to suggest that today’s young people do indeed have different experiences with nature. USA census data finds that different age cohorts exhibit varying degrees of participation in activities such as around-the-home wildlife watching (much of it involving birds), with 55-64 year olds the most likely (48%) and 18-24 year olds the least likely to participate (16%) (US Fish and Wildlife Service 2017a). While the Census did not explore reasons for these age differences, the amount of time that US children spend outside per day has decreased to mere minutes, while the time they spend in front of screens has increased exponentially, creating a further disconnect with nature (Sampson 2015). Not surprisingly, over the decades there has been a waning sense of “personal responsibility” among young people with regard to conservation behaviors (Wray-Lake et al. 2010). An additional factor may be declining rates of homeownership, which have been especially notable for the generation commonly referred to as “Millennials” (Choi et al. 2018). It is difficult to imagine how one becomes a landlord without being a homeowner.

The common practices of killing invasive species to save native species and causing individual suffering for the good of a population has been questioned by advocates of compassionate conservation, who seek to integrate animal welfare into conservation biology (Bekoff 2013; Paquet and Darimont 2010). Landlords’ rhetoric around birds was reminiscent of Herzog’s description of the categorisation of good and bad mice in a research lab depending on whether they were experimental or wild mice (Herzog 1988). Here, some birds (martins) were viewed as good, beneficial, and innocent and while others (House Sparrows and European Starlings) were seen as bad, detrimental, and evil. In dichotomising birds this way and tasking themselves with eradicating bad birds, landlords could be interpreted as engaging in the boundary maintenance aspects of conservation described by Milton (Milton 2000), focusing on eliminating out-of-place species and restoring order, cleaning up the messes made by others who came before them.

Without question, the need to kill competitors was a major barrier to recruiting new landlords and appeals to a smaller and smaller portion of the public. In the USA, hunting declined by 16% between 2011-2016 among those who were 16 and older, while the number of wildlife watchers in this same age group increased by 16% (US Fish and Wildlife Service 2017a). Among around-the-home wildlife watchers, the most popular activities were feeding wild animals (mostly birds) (59,100,000, 73%), observing them (43,800,000, 54%), and photographing them (30,500,000, 38%) (US Fish and Wildlife
Service 2017a). Thus, USA’s sensibilities toward wildlife are shifting from killing toward less destructive ways of interacting with them. Although killing competitors could possibly be de-emphasised to prospective landlords (Carreon et al. 2011) and alternative solutions stressed (e.g., using predator guards to deter competitor species from entering martin housing, fostering businesses where professional landlords perform needed “maintenance services”), the need for individual landlords to kill competitors remains a core emphasis of landlord mentors, limiting the field of potential landlords to those willing to engage in this behaviour. It also restricts the field of landlording largely to men, especially to men who are willing to kill animals (e.g., those raised on farms, hunters, etc.). Those with more post-domestic sensibilities will likely be quite averse to these activities.

This is not, however, to suggest that the fate of martins is sealed. An awareness of generational differences may suggest possible solutions, such as more effective use of technology by advocacy and conservation organisations (e.g., more dynamic and interactive mobile applications), a conceptual framework rooted in environmentalism (e.g., the Anthropocene, sustainability), and the option of moving martin houses and colonies into the public sphere, rather than maintaining them as the conservation activity of private homeowners. Additional research with younger generations would be vital to advancing this work.

The landlords in our study, while focusing on conservation, did so against the backdrop of death. It surfaced in mentoring work when they counselled novices about eradicating competitors or when they destroyed them themselves. It appeared when martins in their colonies died or failed to return from their winter migration. And it was especially pressing when anticipating their own and other landlords’ deaths and the threat that this brought to Purple Martins. But the landlords in our study did not shy away from these challenging aspects of nature and conservation work. Rather than separating themselves from animals and nature, the landlords chose to delve deeply into it. Indeed, awareness of mortality seemed to provide a motive behind their mentoring. If the landlords succeed, their legacy will continue through the birds. But if they fail to develop new models that can effectively foster a new generation of landlords, both their legacy and Purple Martins’ very survival may be threatened.

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