

THE PURPLE MARTIN THEORY

Do Coastal Songbirds Take Credit Where Credit Isn't Due?

BY TERRY POPE

From early spring to August, the twittering and graceful flight of the purple martins along coastal North Carolina catches the eye of bird lovers.

The blue-black birds build nests in dried gourds or manmade houses suspended from tall poles. They are a friend to man, but for years they may have taken credit for work they actually do not perform.

They eat few mosquitoes around the home, some experts say. It remains a growing debate.

"It's all a misunderstanding," said Rick Hickman, Brunswick County's Mosquito Control supervisor. "While they are beautiful birds, they have been mislabeled."

More vicious enemies of mosquitoes are dragonflies, damselflies, bats and larvae eaters that thrive in standing water where mosquitoes hatch. Purple martins actually feed on the damselflies and can somehow gather three or more in its beak to feed its young.

In Brunswick County this spring,

"A dry winter has kept mosquitoes in check, but martins will get the credit."

—Rick Hickman, Brunswick Mosquito Control Supervisor

the mosquito population is down but the purple martin population is higher than in previous years. Residents may get the wrong impression that the birds have alleviated the insect problem, said Hickman.

"That would tend to indicate that purple martins have a really big impact on the mosquito population," said Hickman. "However, this year the dragonfly population is huge. The martins are here because the dragonflies are here."

Less rain during January and February helped the dragonfly and disrupted the mosquito's life cycle. The largest rainfall occurred on Jan. 3, but the county has been relatively dry since. For the most part, a dry winter has kept mosquitoes in check.

"Martins are going to get the credit," said Hickman.

The birds average about seven inches in length and arrive in Brunswick County from their winter homes in early March. By mid-August their nesting season is over and the martins gather in huge flocks to migrate South.

They have become one of North America's most beloved birds and depend almost exclusively on humans for housing. Hickman said native Indians first began attracting martins to keep crows and other predators away from their corn crops.

At first, Indians were successful in attracting mockingbirds, but that species is so aggressive about protecting their territory that only one or two would remain to stand guard over an entire field, leaving it open to an invasion of crows.

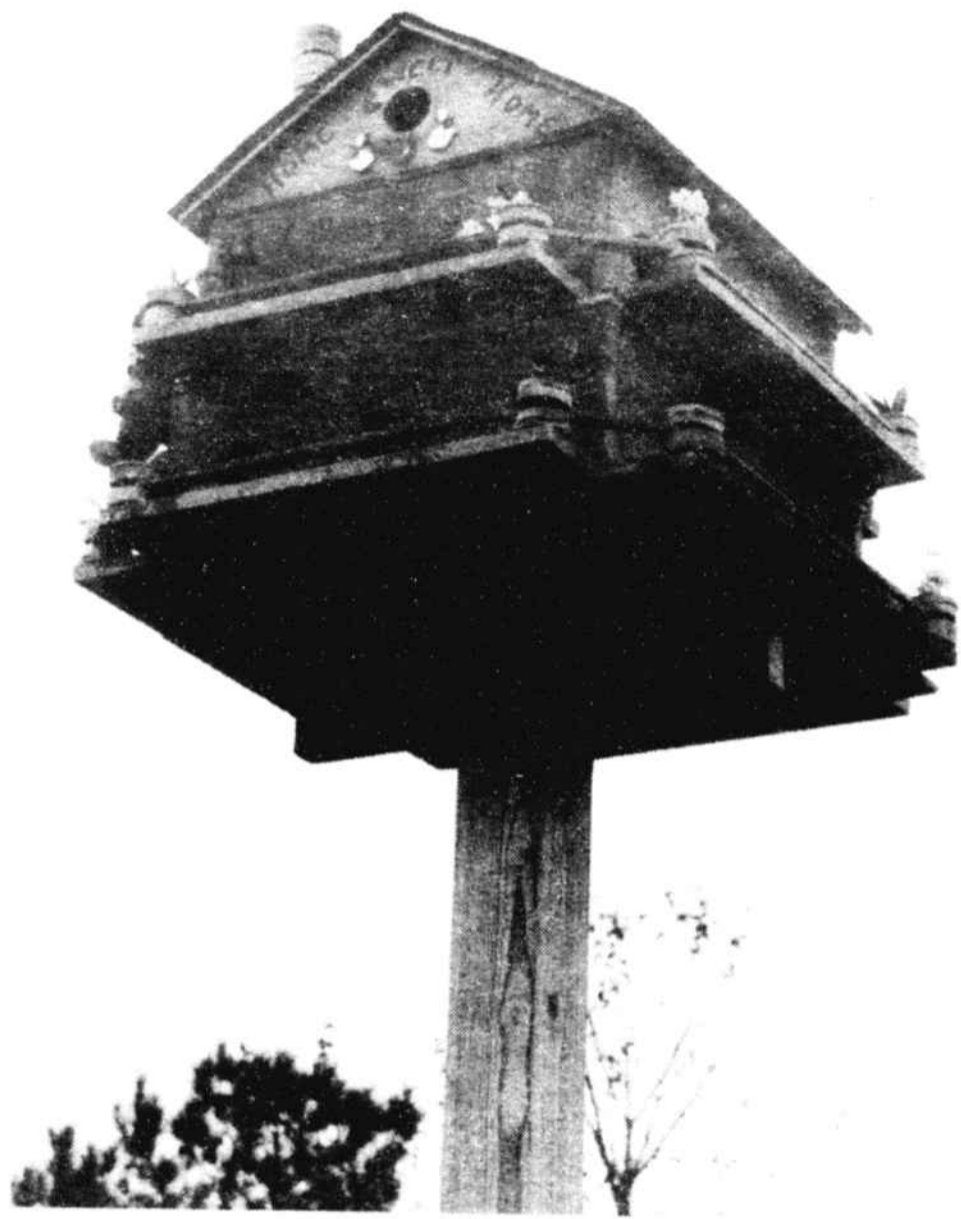
Someone decided martins were better watchmen and the friendship with man has lasted through centuries.

"Someone also made that initial observation that when purple martins were here, fewer mosquitoes are around," said Hickman.

Martins are the largest member of the swallow family and trace patterns in the sky with their daredevil dives. They do eat other insects that are pests to man and his crops.

Still, some with a passion for purple martins cling to folklore which claims the birds can eat up to 2,000 mosquitoes a day. Other experts claim mosquitoes comprise no more than 3 percent of the bird's regular diet.

Around the turn of the century, a



STAFF PHOTO BY TERRY POPE

HOUSES LIKE this one built by students Greg Bland and Josh Baker of Seaside attract purple martins from early spring to August.

flock comprised of an estimated 200,000 martins was spotted at a favorite roosting site in Greensboro. But in August 1905, the granddaddy of all martin stories occurred at Wrightsville Sound near Wilmington.

In *Land of the Golden River*, Lewis Philip Hall recalls the story of Captain John Hanby, owner of the Atlantic View Hotel that once stood along the Wrightsville Sound.

A flock grew in a grove of live

oaks until it numbered around a million. Thousands were shot and killed daily in an attempt to drive them away. Nature eventually drove them South around August, when it was time to migrate, noted Hall.

In spite of the captain's experience, "people living on the beach that year, from Carolina to Wrightsville, said there were not near as many mosquitoes that summer as usual, and they attributed it to the millions of martins in the area," Hall noted.

Even health authorities adopted the myth, encouraging people to keep purple martins around the home to destroy the mosquitoes blamed for transmitting malarial fever, wrote Hall.

There are a number of reasons why homeowners would want to attract purple martins.

However, if the number one reason is to kill mosquitoes, residents would do best to attract bats instead, said Hickman. But people are afraid of bats and believe that all carry rabies.

"There are specifications for building a bat house," said Hickman. "Bats are out at exactly the right time to catch mosquitoes. They don't have to see. They have such acute senses."

However, Hickman has yet to meet anyone with a passion for mosquito-eating bats.

The coastal songbird with the often debated reputation is still number one in the hearts of Brunswick County's homeowners.

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