



Connecticut Purple Martin Newsletter 2016

“We survived, in fact prospered, what started as a difficult season”, reports the Connecticut Audubon Society from a popular and significant purple martin colony at Milford Point Coastal Center. As the martins migrated back north and began nesting this past spring, a cold snap and wet weather throughout the Northeast resulted in the death of dozens of purple martins state-wide. These amazing birds quickly recovered, and with the return of the warm, dry weather, so did an influx of flying insects which made finding food for themselves and their newborns a breeze.

For two weeks in early July, the optimal time this year to band martin chicks, Wildlife Division staff and many volunteers were hard at work visiting active purple martin colonies along Connecticut’s coast. Fifteen colonies were visited as far west as Sherwood Island in Westport and as far east as Stonington near Rhode Island, with some sites containing over 100 newborn purple martin chicks. Other active sites in the state included two separate colonies at Hammonasset Beach State Park, a colony at Milford Point Coastal Center, and many colonies of private purple martin “landlords” whose dedication and enthusiasm for protecting these important birds is unprecedented.



This year, 1,213 purple martin chicks from 313 individual nest boxes were fitted with identifying colored leg bands, weighed, and aged by DEEP staff and volunteers. Purple martin nests contained an average of about 3.8 chicks this year, with four being most common (34%). Along the way, purple martin banders and bird enthusiasts kept an eye out for banded adult martins whose band color combination and band number were recorded whenever possible.

Many adult martins return to the same breeding location year after year, but young martins returning from their first winter in South America are more likely to find new locations. This ongoing banding study, initiated in 2011, investigates dispersal patterns of these second year birds. The data can also be used to determine optimal sites to create new colonies and increase the population of this state-listed species. Reported sightings of color banded birds are essential to the success of this project. Each year the size, effort, and enthusiasm of this project has been increasing, and after this sixth year, over 4,800 purple martin chicks have been banded in Connecticut.

Adding to the excitement was the opportunity to view Connecticut purple martins on a live webcam! This is the second year of the expanded purple martin colony at Connecticut Audubon Society's Milford Point Coastal Center, which is highlighted by a nest camera in one of the gourds and an external camera providing views of the entire colony. Viewers were able to watch two new parents and five purple martin chicks develop from eggs until fledging. Nest cameras are becoming more popular as a few private landlords have installed cameras in their own nests boxes to keep a closer watch on their birds. The DEEP Wildlife Division has created a new webpage dedicated to purple martins to help spread information about the banding project and also let people know how to get involved. Check it out at www.ct.gov/deep/PurpleMartin.



Nearing the end of summer, our martins are well on their way back to the wintering grounds in Brazil; perhaps a few even made it in time for a bird's eye view of the summer Olympics. We wish them well and await their return next spring, hopefully scooping up a few Zika-laden mosquitoes along the way.

AN OBSERVATION

Just as every purple martin seemed to have left the colony and began their migration, an unexpected sight appeared one morning at a private colony in Guilford. Over 60 martins crowded the perches of the martin houses containing un-banded birds, birds from neighboring colonies, and some original residents as well. This has been occurring for several years; perhaps this colony has become a gathering place on the way south. Has anyone else experienced this so late in the season?

