

A BIRD BANDER'S DIARY

RALPH K. BELL

It's been a sad summer for many Purple Martin box owners in this area. That unusual summer hurricane (called Agnes) that stalled over the Middle Atlantic states in June last year really decimated the martin population. Most boxes were empty this summer (except for Starlings and House Sparrows) and this is a depressing experience to anyone that enjoys seeing and hearing these cheerful birds in their yards every nesting season. The Purple Martin adds so much to the summer scene and this was so evident to us this year when we didn't have a single pair for the first time since erecting a box in 1949.

Last June no one knew exactly how many really perished because the few hardy adults that survived left the boxes almost immediately. My estimate at the time was that the adult mortality was 90% and young 100%. No doubt some areas had even greater mortality and those lucky ones that were in the outer fringes of the heavy rain area of course had less. One year later it appears that this estimate was not far from being correct. In talking to many people, I have concluded that there are probably only 15 or 20 colonies of nesting martins in our county in southwestern Penna. (area of 577 sq. miles).

Since Purple Martins are a type of bird that prefers to nest in colonies, the survivors that came back from their wintering grounds seemed to pick only one box in each area and call it "home". The population of most colonies ranged from 2 to 7 pair but one colony near the town of Nineveh had an estimated 15 pair. This has been the largest colony in the county for years - with several boxes and rooms for over 200 pair. I knew of only one box with a single nesting pair. This box was hit by lightning during a severe electrical storm and only the male was seen after that.

It turned out to be a good year for the majority of martins that lived to come back to nest. Weather conditions were generally favorable after their arrival in the spring. The cold spells were not prolonged and although it rained a lot, the temperature was usually high enough that there was some insect activity. Extremely high temperatures this summer were minimal and

there was only one report of any dead young being found on the ground (young will often crawl out of the nest during real hot days and fall to the ground).

This has also been the summer to evaluate what Hurricane Agnes did to all the bird populations. It seemed at the time that all birds living on insects might suffer severe losses but apparently this was not the case. From my personal observations, it would appear that only the Purple Martin and Rough-wing Swallow had extreme losses. Both are considered single brooded. Most of the swallows (and Flycatchers too) could find enough small insects to sustain life but generally not enough to keep their young alive. Many re-nested - even the Kingbirds in our yard surprised me and re-nested again (in another evergreen tree only 25 feet from the old nest containing 4 dead young). There were 3 young raised in the second attempt. Since I would like to learn more about the Kingbird, the 3 young were banded on August 2 and they all left the nest safely on August 8.

Since we didn't have any Purple Martins nesting this year, it was apparent that a martin migration was underway all through the month of July. With so many martins around in other years this could not be detected before. The Charleston, W. Va. banders - Connie Katholi and Anne Shreve, et al, have been banding and making a study of the Purple Martins at the big roost there for about 10 years and they have always reported a build-up in numbers in July. The first migrating (?) martin was noticed flying around our box this year on July 2. Every few days singles and family groups would circle the box and then continue on in a southwesterly direction.

In questioning local martin box owners, many thought that most of their martins left around July 26 and the later hatched ones leaving about August 3. However, my good friend Bill Haver reported that the last 6 martins left his neighbor's box on August 15. Bill's own box had been empty all summer but there were 10 sleeping in it on the night of August 18 and at least some slept there every night until August 22. Bill observed several feeding high overhead the next day and that was the last any were observed in this area.

Since 5 martins banded here have been netted by the Charleston, W. Va. banders, and it is apparent that the martins from this area stop at that big roost there en route to S. America.

each fall, I wrote to Connie Katholi and asked for information about numbers, etc. this year. She reported back that no roost had been found for the first time and that all the banders and helpers were quite discouraged. But on August 20, Connie dropped me a card saying that the roost had been located. A letter followed the next day explaining everything in detail. It is so interesting I would like to quote from her letter as follows.... "we would not have found it, I guess, if we had not run an article in the newspaper. Even then it took about two weeks for anyone to contact us (and then it was two people independently). The roost is in Nitro, W. Va., about 10 miles northwest of the old location. It is not on the Kanawa River, but on Armor Creek, about three-quarters of a mile away from the river. Like the old roost in Jefferson Park, it is essentially a suburban area. Homes with lawns leading down to the creek, but the birds are really on the opposite side of the creek, where there is an old cornfield, and a lot of overgrown stuff. All of which slopes upward to a hill which is the location of one of the biggest BLACKBIRD ROOSTS we have ever seen. It is a messy place, and not an easy one to band in as it was at the old roost along the boulevard near Patrick Street bridge. Weeds were waist high, and the trees quite tall - taller than we had decided the martins usually favored. Actually all these problems could be overcome if we had found the birds earlier, but time is short now for much clearing and construction of raised nets. We did set two nets last night in a small clearing which George Koch and Ray Ashworth cleared hurriedly with Anne's Shreve's scythe and netted 5 martins and 2 robins. So at least we were not skunked! But the trees are too high, and they do not swoop through that little clearing. You have never seen as many starlings as there were either! Today it has been pouring rain all day so we will have to wait and go to the roost again tomorrow"...end of quote.

In closing, I would like to relate a true story (but I imagine there will be plenty of doubters). A friend of mine, Everette Cleaver, was fishing at a farm pond in June 1968. He caught a 12-inch large-mouthed Bass and noticed that it had a large lump in its stomach. Upon cutting the fish open, he found that the "lump" was a freshly swallowed adult male Purple Martin. Everette has four martin boxes of his own so there was no likelihood of mistaken identity. Fish often jump out of the water for large insects, and - one can only surmise - that just as the martin skimmed the water to get a drink, the fish made the right jump at the right time....and what a mouthful it must have been.

CORRIGENDA - EBBA NEWS, Vol. 35, #4, page 284. Near the bottom of the page it reads "all flycatchers may be in trouble as a Wood Pewee was hungry as he was seen eating canned dog food what was left in the dog pan". Somewhere a line became lost and since I doubt that a Wood Pewee would eat dog food on his own, no matter how hungry, I feel a correction should be made. The corrected sentence should read as follows: "All flycatchers may be in trouble as a Wood Pewee was noted on a lawn chair watching for insects. Even our male Bluebird was hungry as he was seen eating canned dog food that was left in the dog pan".

--R.D. 1, Box 229, Clarksville, Pa.

ATLANTIC FLYWAY REPORT - Region VI

Edited by Donald F. Clark

Five contributors sent in reports for the fall migration of 1972. Harriet Marsi's summary usually found in this region report was included with region two and Jonnie Fisk must have been so busy compiling material for the Bird Banding Office that she forgot to send in her records for the season. Any bander not located in one of the other regions is welcome to submit a summary of their banding for inclusion in this report. Just contact me for information or submit a report. My new address is RD Hicks Road, Franklinville, New York 14737.

The area encompassed in Region 6 is so great that direct comparisons between stations cannot be made. However, it is interesting to note both similarities and differences in the various stations. Presque Isle and Farmersville Station both reported adverse weather conditions during the migration. Mr. Peter Homann banding in the Laurentians reported almost a 400% increase in numbers of warblers banded. Allegheny Front had the third highest total ever and Presque Isle was very close to their all time high. Powdermill reported a very good migration but Farmersville had a very poor year.

The following table lists many of the interesting statistics for each station: