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PURPLE MARTINS ATTRACTED TO GRASSWOOD

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In 1987, my wife and I moved to an acreage located four miles south of Saskatoon. This location, the old Grasswood Saskatchewan Wheat Pool grounds, is well treed as a result of plantings years ago by my in-laws, Jack and Lillian Briggs.

After retirement in 1995, I put a birdbath in the garden and my wife bought me some bird feeders. In 1998, I put out a metal Purple Martin house with 12 cavities which was given to me by a friend, and four single-cavity super gourds from the Purple Martin Conservation Association (PMCA). That year nothing came.

In 1999 a few pairs of martins visited but none stayed. I read an article about

the social attraction method developed by Steven Kress, a Cornell University biologist trying to reestablished Atlantic Puffin colonies. Colonial birds have a strong preference to nest in close proximity to each other and Kress reasoned that if he could trick migrating puffins into believing that former colony sites were active, they would stay and attempt to breed. His technique involved the use of decoys, vocalizations, fake nests and mirrors. The social attraction method is ultimately the art of deception, trickery and manipulation to establish a breeding colony.

I started trying to attract Purple Martins by putting up some wooden Purple Martin decoys. I got decoy plans from the Purple Martin Forum on the

internet (www.purplemartin.org) and obtained carving instruction from Leroy Royer, a local bird carver. In 2000, I got plans for a wooden Purple Martin house from a friend and built two with 16 cavities each, and added another three natural gourds, for a total of 51 cavities. I also added mirrors on the front of the houses. The mirrors make the visiting martin believe there are other martins present at the site. I also obtained a Dawnsong CD from the PMCA at Edinboro University in Pennsylvania and began playing the "dawn-song" of the Purple Martin.

Our efforts paid off. We were overjoyed when one martin came on May 16, 2000 and stayed. He in turn attracted an additional seven martins for a total of eight birds. There were three mated pairs and two presumed forlorn bachelors who sang without success, evidently in an attempt to attract mates. We were pleased when the three pairs raised broods (two broods of four and one brood of three) for a total of eleven nestlings. Two eggs failed to hatch. All the young fledged successfully. The last martin was seen at the colony on August 22.

In 2001, I added another seven natural gourds, for a total of 58 available cavities. This year we had great success: 16 martin pairs laid a total of 81 eggs. Three pairs raised 6 nestlings each, six pairs raised 5 nestlings, six pairs raised 4 nestlings, and one pair had 3 nestlings. A total of 75 nestlings fledged successfully. However six eggs failed to hatch. Mary Houston came out to band the hatchlings on July 4, July 12, July 20; and the last brood of only three nestlings on July 31 for a total of 75.

This year, the last of our resident birds left on August 17. A passing flock inspected the premises for a few hours

on the morning of August 20. We hope that some of these visitors may have been sufficiently impressed that they will join our colony in 2002. I am ready to give supplemental food to martins arriving early next year if the weather is too poor for them to catch insects. Supplemental feeding has been done successfully by some colony owners in an effort to save their colonies, as Purple Martins will start to die after four to five days without food. I have about 2000 grasshoppers that I caught and placed in my freezer to keep them fresh.

Purple Martins are known to like nest sites near lakes, so this year I built an artificial stream with small ponds and little waterfalls, that runs through the garden. A pump is used to recycle water continuously from the bottom holding tank back to the top of the stream. This has proved to be a great attraction to many other songbirds like Pine Siskins, Cedar Waxwings, American Goldfinches, Northern Flickers, American Robins and native sparrows.

The natural gourds grow in the southern United States on a vine just like pumpkins. Some gourds were given to me by a friend in Florida and the rest were bought in Alabama on my winter travels. The gourds have to be dried for four to five months in order to develop a very hard shell. Then they are drilled with an entrance hole and an access hole and cured by placing them in copper sulfate for about 20 minutes. After they are dry, I attach screw-on caps and paint them white.

For ease of access, each house and each set of gourds can be lowered about ten feet, down to about shoulder height. Each compartment of each house has a removable front panel, and each gourd has a separate screw-on cap near the back, to allow inspection every four to five days after egg laying has started.



Mary Houston bands a Purple Martin chick. The natural gourds shown here are painted white. Note the small entrance hole and the larger access hole covered with a screw-on cap.

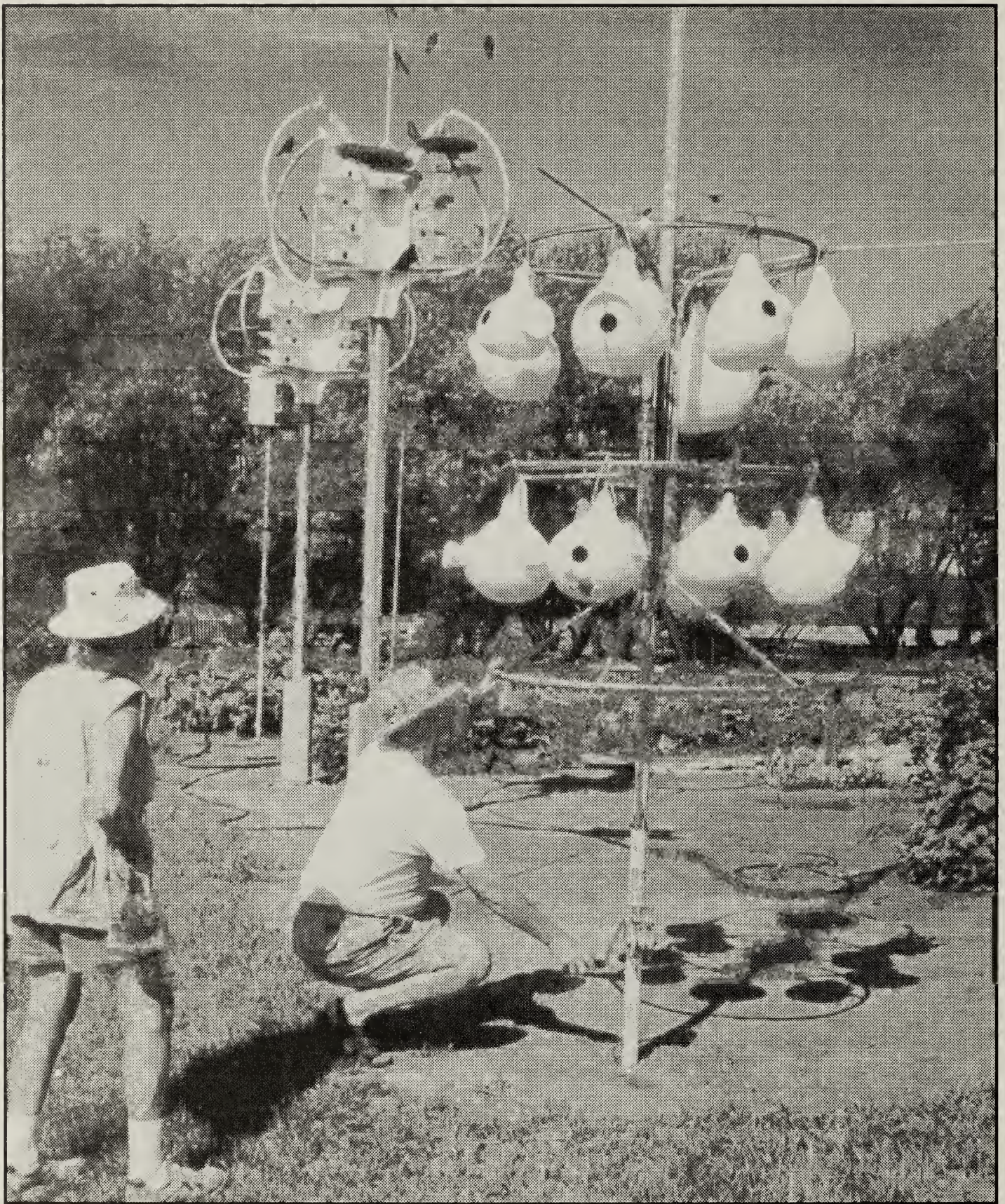
Jan Tedesco

All the housing units are stored indoors over winter, and put back out of doors in mid-April before the Purple Martins come back.

I control House Sparrows with the use of a small insert trap that I place in any compartment to catch – unharmed – intruding House Sparrows; when the sparrow steps on the treadle, a small flap covers the hole and traps the sparrow inside the compartment. I then use the sparrow as a decoy by placing

it a holding pen in a wire sparrow trap to catch other sparrows. I keep the captured sparrows fed and watered as long as possible.

Before the 1900s, martins nested mainly in natural cavities like excavated woodpecker holes, crevices in scraggly rock faces and natural cavities in old trees, although Native Americans in southeastern North America were providing Purple Martins with gourds for nesting as early as the 1700's.¹ Now



The author lowers the gourds so that bander Mary Houston (left) can reach the young. Martin houses and Purple Martins are in the background.

Jan Tedesco

Purple Martins east of the Rockies nest almost exclusively in colonies of man made housing.

The first record of Purple Martins nesting in the Saskatoon area dates from 1967 at the Patience Lake Potash Plant.² Colonial nest boxes have been used in the residential areas of

Saskatoon since 1969 and there are some large colonies, each with forty or more pairs, at Shields Townsite on Blackstrap Reservoir and near Clavet.

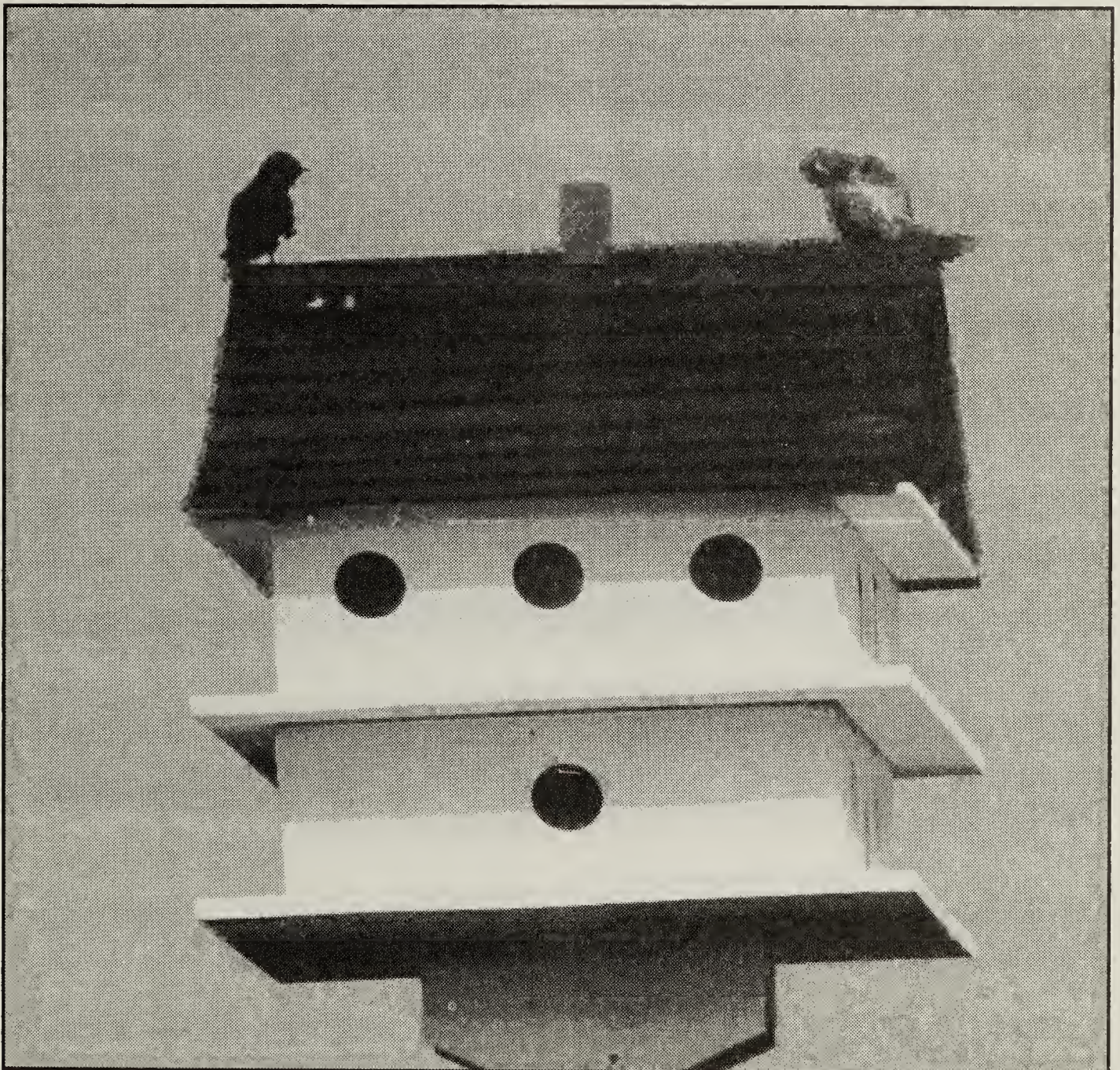
Acknowledgements

I am grateful to my wife, Bev, for giving me a “keep-busy” retirement project. I would like to thank Stuart Houston for

keyboarding and editing my words, and Mary Houston for coming out to band the nestlings, and my Purple Martin mentors Del Davies and Ken Hoyt. If any readers want to get additional information about Purple Martins, you can contact PMCA at www.purplemartin.org or myself at parent@duke.usask.ca.

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A pair of Purple Martins at their home in Alberta. (Also see page 216).

George Tosh