

March-April

A Bird Bander's Diary

by
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March 18 A beautiful sunny warm day and the first two Purple Martins arrived at a box in the nearby town of Jefferson. The first arrivals always create some excitement to the local Martin enthusiasts in our area. Each box owner hopes to be the first to have his Martins come back. As a result there is often much phone ringing to relay the news (and perhaps a little bragging too). This 18 March date is about a week earlier than usual but not as early as the extra early date of our first arrival on 7 March, 1956, at 4 p.m. Two others arrived that year on 17 March, but they all died later during a cold spell.

March 22 Five Purple Martins (3 males, 2 females) arrived here looking for our 30-room box. The box was not up yet as I like to wait until they arrive ... less trouble later from Starlings and English Sparrows. These first Martins went through the usual ritual of walking around on the iron plate on top of the pole (that supports the box) and crane their necks down over the edge looking for their home.

March 27 22 degrees at 7 a.m., but warmed up to 34 degrees p.m. This is the fourth day in a row for snow flurries, and our Martins seem cold and dejected - just staying on the perches with feathers ruffled. There is no argument now over which compartment belongs to whom. Survival is the important thing. At night most of them pile into two compartments for warmth and tails (or wings) can still be seen sticking out long after daylight each morning.

March 29 17 degrees early, but sunny and temp. up to 41 degrees by 11 a.m. when I noticed 6 Martins trying to get a few insects in a sheltered spot near my Mother's mailbox. They were resting on a rail fence and would fly out for an occasional insect and then come back. They were so weak they could hardly balance themselves on a flat rail (which they preferred to a nearby wire fence). It looked (to me) like a losing cause as the energy gained from catching former insects was probably lost by the time they struggled back to the rails for another rest. It was a sad sight indeed.

April 6 31 degrees a.m. Snow squalls all day. During a sunny period between snow squalls, I saw 5 of our Martins doing something I had never observed before. They were on the ground near their box

picking at the grass (or ground) as if to try and get some nourishment. The next snow squall caused them to leave the ground, and because of their weakened condition could hardly get back to the box.

April 10 32 degrees a.m. The first Martin did not come out of the box until 10:30 a.m. In general, the weather seems to be moderating, but many of those early arriving Martins in the area have perished. One man found 5 dead in his box. Two others reported 2 dead, etc., etc. Of course most dead were never seen as they were too weak to get back to their boxes. While Screech Owls, mites, and screw fly larvae take their toll of young Martins, I am convinced that Martin populations are largely governed by the length and timing of the cold spells each spring. One factor that greatly helps preserve the species is the fact that the sub-adults start to arrive about a month later than the adults. The first young male this year was captured and banded on 29 April. The earliest any sub-adult was ever known to arrive at our boxes was on 27 April, 1949.

Picture No. 1 shows how our 30-room Purple Martin box looks when propped open for banding the young (around 25 June in this area). Picture No. 2 shows the same Martin box with a Starling box trap underneath. This is very effective in controlling Starlings and English Sparrows. These pests much prefer the deep trap for nest inspection (for future use) than the flat nest compartments the Martins use. Flickers and Sparrow Hawks are occasionally caught in this box also. Since it does disturb the Martins somewhat when a ladder is put up to remove the Starlings and Spatzies, I now have 3 box traps on the nearby barn, and the pests are controlled just as well (and without disturbing the Martins).

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