



July-August

A Bird Bander's Diary

by Ralph K. Bell

June 8, 1967 ... My brother-in-law called on the phone this evening and told me that something must be wrong at my mother's 10-room Purple Martin box as no Martins had been seen on the box all day. A few would fly around calling excitedly, but would be afraid to alight on the box. I immediately went to check as to the reason. Several years ago (late in the season) they had done the same thing. That time only a few late hatched young young had not yet left the box and their parents would fly around the box with food but would refuse to land and feed them. Upon examination, it was discovered the box was covered with mites. There seemed to be literally millions of them. Ever since then I have sprinkled some Malathion dust in each room when the box is put up in spring and added a little more when the young Martins are banded, if any mites are found.

There had been trouble at this same box last year, too. About the middle of July 1966, my mother told me that she hadn't noticed any Martins around her box for a few days and wondered if the young could have left so soon. Since 22 young had been banded in that box on the last day of June, I knew that the young should still be there and I put up a ladder for a check. There was not a young Martin to be found - even in the two gable holes that I cannot get into to band the young. I checked the box over thoroughly. There were a few indistinct marks here and there but not enough of them to identify a predator. The five-inch iron pole was slightly rusty, but even if something could manage to climb it, it didn't seem possible that any animal could reach out far enough from the pole to grasp the lower railing of the box (a total of $8\frac{1}{2}$ inches from pole to edge of box). I even considered flying squirrels and snakes, but several trips would have been necessary to consume so many young. Screech Owls were ruled out because many openings were too small, having been partially filled by mud by the adult Martins at nest building time.

But today there was much more evidence as to what really happened. Numerous feathers were scattered here and there along the whole length of the pole. I examined the pole closely and found some raccoon hairs and several typical claw marks. Although five or six pairs of Martins had built nests, there wasn't an egg to be found. The raccoon had reached into each compartment and pulled out every egg. Several adult Purple Martins

had been caught and eaten also. The number of feathers on the roof indicated the raccoon had used that for a table. The raccoon was evidently very wet from walking through the damp night grass and the Martin feathers stuck to him and everything he touched. Therefore, he left plenty of feathers on the pole as he slid down to the ground. Raccoons are very intelligent, as EBBA's past president Eleanor Dater will tell you (I believe they are her favorite animal). We had one for a pet once and I'll have to admit they are in a class by themselves. Their forepaws are like hands and are very strong. Our pet raccoon was particularly fond of marshmallows. I heard of one that loved jelly so much that when the raccoon could not reach the jelly (in a tall glass jar) with a front paw, the longer hind paw was put into use.

Aug. 17 ... Approximately 50 Barn Swallows are having their daily early morning "song-fest" on the electric wires near the kitchen porch. This has been going on during July and August for years. They usually stay and chatter for an hour or more each morning. Their number varies and some years builds up to over 100 birds. Most are young of the year and tomorrow morning many new ones will soon arrive to replace those that move on. After each succeeding cool spell in August, there are fewer Barn Swallows around. They eliminate entirely their early morning ritual when our local Barn Swallows leave on their leisurely trip to South America. I have noticed that our adult Barn Swallows try to have their last brood out of the nest by not later than August 23. It is rare indeed for them to remain in the nest here after that date. The only exception has been one pair that did not get their young out of the nest until the 29th of August (1961). The adults seem to estimate time and will often even abandon eggs around the first of August if they will be unable to get the young on the wing by the above date (2 nests were abandoned this year and one contained five eggs).

Aug. 29 ... Received a card from EBBA member Connie Katholi (of Charleston, W. Va.) today asking if I had banded an immature Purple Martin with band No. 71-126297. I immediately checked my records and noted that this band was put on a nestling Martin this summer on July 7. This nestling was in my 10-room Jacobs box and there were five young in that particular nest. That big Purple Martin roost in Charleston, W. Va. (approximately 200 miles southwest of here) must be the gathering place for Martins from a very large area before they continue their trip toward South America. That is the second Purple Martin that the Charleston banders have captured that was banded here (an immature captured and banded here in the yard on July 17, 1965 was recaptured at the roost there on August 12, 1965). The Charleston banders are to be congratulated for the interest and hard work necessary to contribute useful knowledge about the movement of Purple Martins. Any distant recovery not only gives a purpose for banding but is also thrilling to the participants, and any direct recoveries are doubly so.