

A BIRD BANDER'S DIARY

*by**Ralph K. Bell*

Lonely Purple Martin houses stood silent in many yards in Eastern United States during July 1972. To Purple Martin enthusiasts, this was an interesting and exciting period. Most young leave the boxes at this time and come back to the box each night for several nights. This congregating at the box each evening, plus the normal feeding of late hatched young is a sight never to be forgotten by anyone who has ever witnessed it- especially if it is a large colony as the air-space near the box is literally filled with martins.

The reason for the silent martin houses this year was the week-long rainy period caused by an early season Hurricane called Agnes. It stalled over Pennsylvania and produced continuous rains over a very large area that included Maryland, New Jersey Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia, West Virginia and bordering states. Hurricane Agnes was called the worst storm disaster in our history because it caused so much destruction over such a large area - not by high winds but by flooding from heavy rainfall. EBBA Member Walter Bigger wrote me that they had over 13 inches and that's a lot of water.

In areas like Wilkes-Barre and Harrisburg, Pa., where property damage was so terrible, there was little time to worry about what happened to the bird life but there is no doubt that the death loss was very heavy. Of course, some species were hurt much worse than others with those that lived on flying insects being affected the most over the entire area. It is hoped that many of these adults that survived re-nested. Our adult Kingbirds in the yard lived through it and built a second nest only about 30 feet from the original nest containing 4 dead young. They fledged successfully on August 8th.

The Purple Martin appeared to be hurt the worst but this could be because it nested in back yards and death losses were so easily tallied. Banders will be in a good position to evaluate the severity of losses of many species if their captures are far below other years with the same amount of banding effort. Since many young died in the nest, aging of fall captures will be very important. Also breeding counts will be watched closely in 1973 to see if there are any sharp reductions of some species.

While this report may be depressing in many respects it may not be as bad as it seems on the surface. Some species of

birds are very vulnerable to the forces of nature and in extreme and unusual cases mortality can be extremely high.

I will now give an account of events leading up to the tragedy and what happened later on our farm in southwestern Pennsylvania.

June 18, 1972.....It was cloudy most of the day and altho cooler than average for June, no one suspected the dire events that were to take place later in the week. It had my alarm set for 3:15 A.M. and at 3:50 A.M. picked up Wes Knisley (who makes my bluebird boxes) and we headed for West Virginia to run Breeding Bird Survey Route #041. Desirable coverage is lacking in some areas of West Virginia and members of the Brooks Bird Club (Wheeling, W.Va.) are attempting to correct this and are running 3 new routes in the Wheeling-New Martinsville area.

Route 041 was mostly on the ridges with only one dip down near the Ohio River. Bluebirds were quite common and we counted 34 at 19 stops. This was a pleasant surprise, and perhaps for a good reason: there were plenty of fence posts and no House Wrens noted until stop #37. Also, Starlings were not overabundant with only 51 at 19 stops. Yellow-br. Chats were quite common (62 at 42 stops) as were Indigo Buntings (59 at 30 stops).

June 19, 1972.....Cloudy with some rain today

June 20, 1972.....Rain all day

June 21, 1972.....Rain at times, merely in the morning.

Rest of the day dark and dreary.

June 22, 1972.....Heavy rain all day with a high of about 50°. Lots of Barn Swallows around the house looking for flies. Our Purple Martins stayed in boxes all day or sat disheveled on the perches slowly starving.

June 23, 1972.....Heavy rain all last night. 47° at Pittsburgh this morning (this tied the record low for date in 1918). Barn Swallows frantically hunting flies around house and other buildings to feed young both in and out of nests (probably 20 nests in buildings on farm this year). Young Barn Swallows continually sitting on lawn chairs begging for food. All flycatchers may be in trouble as a Wood Pewee was hungry as he was seen eating canned dogfood what was left in the dog pan. There was a light rain most of the day and the temperature did not get above 55 degrees. Most of the Purple Martins stayed in boxes all day as their kind of insects just don't hatch and fly around in this kind of weather.

June 24, 1972.....Cloudy but no rain until toward evening. Temperature about the same as yesterday. Wood Pewee sitting on railing of porch in the morning. The Barn Swallows found a few flies in afternoon but Purple Martins mostly stayed in their

boxes and apparently are in real trouble. Reports of dying or dead young and adults were received from friends in nearby towns. Mrs. Bell made up a paste consisting of the yolk of hard-boiled egg, hamburger, cottage cheese and milk. We brought in two very weak young out-of-the-nest Barn Swallows and fed them every half hour as an experiment.

June 25, 1972.....The temp. 51 degrees early A.M., but rain has stopped. One of the Barn Swallows died during the night but the other one is quite perky. Three Purple Martins came out of the box at 9:15 and landed on the electric wires. An adult female flew down to the puddle of water in the driveway and drank - than walked through it. Since she was too weak to fly anymore, we brought her in and fed her. We have noticed other Purple Martins walking through water puddles too. The final stages of starvation may cause extreme thirst - anyway, they would usually be dead in a very short time. The sun came out a few times in the afternoon and temp. up to 73. Lots of flies around now so the remaining Barn Swallows should make it. Released the female martin we had fed, at 2:30 P.M. She seemed much stronger and flew off. Sure hope she makes it. I banded her before releasing and that is the only Martin banded here this year.

June 26, 1972..... Since a racoon had just about eliminated our martin colony last year, we only had about 15 pair when Hurricane Agnes came along with her continuous rain and cold weather. When checking the boxes, I found all young dead - some over half grown. All nests with eggs were deserted and it appears that only two adults survived. There were 7 dead adults in one compartment. Evidently they had all crowded in together to try and keep warm but in doing this, blocked the hole and none could get out. Two were banded last year as adults and the other one was a nestling banded July 6, 1967. This would be a golden opportunity to find out more about distribution and age of martins banded here over the years (approx. 2400 since 1954) but most martin box owners will probably try and get the unpleasant dead martin removal job over with and not think of looking for bands .

June 27, 1972..... Five adult martins came to the boxes this evening but believe they were migrating as they were afraid to alight on the boxes.

June 28, 1972.....Saw 2 adult Martins this morning. None were seen the following day.

July 1, 1972.... Five migrating adult Purple Martins circled around our boxes at 9:15 but soon flew off southwestward.

(Editor's note: The Diary handed in by Ralph is unexpectedly lengthy this time. It will be continued next time as the other two pages will not fit.)