

Purple Martin Project launched in Essex

by Shelby Wye

The Town of Essex launched the Colchester Purple Martin Project Wednesday June 15 as part of the efforts in the area to maintain and grow the purple martin swallow's population.

When John Balga started observing purple martins at age 12, he couldn't ever imagine them disappearing from Essex County's shorelines. Purple martins used to have colonies by the thousands but by the 1980s they had all but disappeared in this area due to competition with fiercer birds like starlings and house sparrows, climate change and a lack of areas to roost.

Balga always admired the birds, so when he noticed them disappearing, he took action. He made the Ontario Purple Martin Association (OPMA). This group is committed to "advancing the understanding, appreciation and conservation of purple martins and their habitats." They work to attract the population to the area and when they come they do their best to take care of them.

This includes putting up birdhouses specific to a purple martin's need in locations that would suit them. The group thought that the Colchester Harbour would be the perfect location to attract breeding pairs due to the bountiful amount of insects.

"When a group of local Purple Martin enthusiasts approached the Town with a plan to install and maintain a house, we were excited to participate," said Doug Sweet, director of community services. He admitted that before the group approached him, he had no idea the struggle this bird species was facing. The town and the local Communities in Bloom group paired with the OPMA to install the bird house.

The birds need constant intervention from mankind. These birds are called 'secondary cavity' nesters, meaning they use cavities already created either by other birds or natural hidey-holes in cliffs or trees. Native Americans became admirers of the birds for an unknown reason and put up hollowed gourds for them to nest in. From there, the purple martins traditions shifted as man-made homes because

more prevalent and natural cavities declined.

Now, anywhere east of the Rocky Mountains, the purple martins only live in man-made nest.

OPMA helps these birds by setting up houses designed for the swallows and also monitor the nests, ousting out any other species that try to make a home in their birdhouses. They see that members of the public have been putting up houses as well, but point out that purple martins have very specific needs for their perfect perch. Information on how to keep purple martins nesting in your own backyard is available on OPMA's website www.essexpurplemartins.ca.

"The better that people know of these birds, the better off they will be," said Paul Hamel, the chair of OPMA.

The next efforts of OPMA will be to equip the fledglings born in the area with bands or tracking devices.

"Hopefully, by keeping track of them, we can find out how to keep them around," said Hamel. Currently, around 4000 fledglings are born in OPMA-monitored nests.

This species is the largest North American swallow, the males are an iridescent purple while the females are a duller colour. They flit through the air, performing acrobatic spins to catch insects like dragonflies and mayflies. These migratory breed travel between South America to Canada every year, coming to breed during the summer in the northern hemisphere.



The Ontario Purple Martin Association (OPMA) partnered with Essex Communities in Bloom and the Town of Essex to launch the Purple Martin Project in Colchester. A bird house has been put up at Colchester Harbour along with an informational plaque. From left to right, OPMA members Tim O'Hagan, John Blaga, Mary Meloche of Communities in Bloom, Paul Hamel the OPMA chair, Dennis Shady and Al Hamill of OPMA and Doug Sweet, director of community services for Essex.



There are four nesting pairs of purple martins already making home at the Colchester Harbour bird-house. The female is on the left, with a dark back and light front, and the male is on the right, a pure dark purple colour. The birds flit around the house and are easy to spot when visiting the park. Be careful not to disturb the house and please keep the interaction limited to taking photos.



The purple martins are already laying eggs in their new home at Colchester Harbour. The doors of the birdhouse are narrow arches that only these swallows can slip through. Each home has two compartments separated by a wall and the birds make a nest in the back compartment. This discourages any predators or nuisance birds.

