

Williamsburg Bird Club

Wednesday, September 16, 2020

Conducted via Zoom, Invited by Dean Shostak and presided by Cheryl Jacobson, 7pm

Attendance: 65

President's Remarks: President Cheryl Jacobson welcomed everyone. We had one attendee from western Pennsylvania who was a friend of the speaker. Cheryl started the meeting with the evening's presentation.

Program – Mike Bishop: Michael Bishop of Fairfax County has a background of working with Purple Martins and other cavity nesting bird programs for 38 years; became a Master Naturalist in 2013 and founded the Northern Virginia Purple Martin Initiative in 2015. He and trained volunteers obtain permission to erect and monitor donated housing for cavity nesters on public property and advise and mentor new cavity nester landlords on private property. They also host seminars for environmental groups and clubs. To date they have installed 22 Purple Martin colonies, 2 Wood Duck trails, 4 Bluebird trails, one Prothonotary Warbler trail, and a Kestrel project with 8 out of 11 houses hosting breeding pairs. Mike shared his passion for Purple Martins in his program, *The Purple Martin, America's Most Wanted Bird*.

Purple Martins are the largest swallow in North America and they spend the winter in the Amazon Basin particularly in Brazil and Bolivia. Interestingly, thousands roost on the wires of Brazilian oil refineries perhaps because there are fewer predators. In summer, they breed from Florida all the way up to and including most of southern Canada. There are two distinct subspecies. Our eastern species occupies a range east of the Rocky Mountains and they live in colonies and nest solely in manmade birdhouses. The species west of the Rockies is not colonial and still uses natural cavities for nesting. Researchers at the Purple Martin Conservation Association have been attaching GPS tags and geolocators to martins before they migrate to gather more data about exact routes and duration of the journey.

Historically, they were probably called martins by colonists because of their resemblance to European House Martins. Early American ornithologists did report seeing Native American-built gourd houses. One possibility for their putting up gourds was to protect animal hides that were being stretched and tanned from being damaged by crows, ravens and raptors picking at residue meat on the hides. Purple Martins are very territorial and would have likely chased them away. In 1831 John James Audubon wrote that almost every country tavern had a martin box on the upper part of its sign-board and that the handsomer the box, the better the inn tended to be. In the 1920's-40's, oil and railroad tycoons were competing with each other spending as much as \$3,000 to build a more impressive martin house. Then with the invention of the television and aluminum, a Mr. J. L. Wade opened an antenna manufacturing company in Griggsville, IL. He was also a birder and upon realizing that Griggsville was in a martin migratory corridor, he converted the factory to making aluminum martin houses. His slogan was '*AMERICA'S MOST WANTED BIRD, can eat 2,000 mosquitoes a day*'. He wrote a couple of books about Purple Martins and made Griggsville the Purple Martin capital of the nation. It has since been proven that Purple Martins do not provide any protection from mosquitoes because the insect lives too close to the ground for martins to hunt them. Data shows an incidental take of mosquitoes being less than 3% of their diet.

Mike reported that males are sexually mature after their first winter but because it takes 3 years for the male to develop the solid purple plumage, it is often difficult to differentiate young males from females. He described scouts as being experienced martins of 3 or more years of age who arrive first, often in March, to select the best housing. Their push to arrive early sometimes costs them their lives if there is an unexpected cold spell and not enough insects to eat over a 3-4-day period. The younger birds arrive in a second wave May through June and are often the ones who set up house in a new colony and start site fidelity. Purple Martins are distinct from other swallows in that they hunt large flying insects (beetles, flies, dragonflies, grasshoppers, wasps and bees) swept up by thermals at altitudes higher than 150 feet and sometimes 500 feet or more off the ground. They depend completely on insects caught on the wing and land on the ground only to collect nesting material or small bits of gravel to help them digest exoskeletons. Both sexes build a nest starting with a base of dry pine needles, twigs, oak leaves and then just before egg laying, line it with green leaves. The average number of eggs per nest is 4-6. Mike described the aluminum houses made popular by Mr. Wade with 6x6 inch compartments as too small and poorly ventilated for a nesting pair unless a partition is removed to convert two rooms into one. He championed bigger plastic gourds with clean out ports and a Starling resistant entrance hole. Any bird house with a round hole can be retrofitted with a starling resistant entrance. There is no way to keep House Sparrows out other than constantly removing the nest. After 5-6 removals, the sparrows usually give up. As a non-native species, they are not protected by the Migratory Bird Act and their nests and the birds can be removed legally. He stressed the importance of using poles with a pulley system for lowering and raising to clean the house at the end of the year and to monitor the nest for problems. He described saving fledgling birds from mite infestation by changing the bedding and adding Sevin dust or diatomaceous earth. He uses stove pipe snake guards but the ultimate protection from big rat snakes is tying wadded garden netting around the pole. Netting should be monitored so snakes caught in it can be cut free and relocated. Selecting the right habitat and proper location of martin lodging is critical. It needs to be in an open area and a minimum of 40 feet away from trees and buildings. Mike recommended the Purple Martin Dawnsong CD for attracting martins to a new site. Some colonies take a few years to get started. He also recommended Eagle Scouts as an excellent resource for helping with any bird projects and pointed out the potential of colleges, public schools and federal and state parks providing space for a colony and helping fund the equipment. He concluded by advising joining the Purple Martin Conservation Association and to add to their databases. He personally has found these birds to be so engaging that they feel like pets by the end of the season.

Purple Martin Project Update: Cheryl reported that a pole and pulley system has been installed at Chickahominy Riverfront Park and that she has gotten permission to install a setup at New Quarter Park and will order the materials. She invited members to notify her if they would like to help with installation. Next year monitors will be needed for the club sponsored martin houses at New Quarter Park, Chickahominy Riverfront Park and York River State Park.

Hawk Watch – Nancy Barnhart: Records/Liaison to CVWO: Nancy reported that Hawkwatch has been running since September 1st. To date they've counted almost 850 Kestrels. Last year it was less than 400. About 200 Broad-winged Hawks have been reported. Almost 1,000 birds were counted just yesterday including a Black-whiskered Vireo (second time in Virginia's records). She noted that proper Covid safety precautions are being observed on the platform and invited members to visit. She added that one might see migratory songbirds passing a full moon using binoculars.

Programs- Dean Shostak: Co-Vice-President, Programs: Dean reported that the October speaker will be Katie Fallon, the author of **Cerulean Blues: A Personal Search for a Vanishing Songbird**. As a speaker, she is much in demand and Cheryl has spent 6 years trying to engage her for our club. Zoom has facilitated finally making it happen. Master Naturalists will be invited.

Bird Walks: Scott Hemler reported that he will be leading the first Covid era bird walk on Saturday, September 26th at 8 am at New Quarter Park. The walk is limited to 6 participants who have made a reservation via email with Cheryl and have signed a waiver and agreed to taking Covid safety precautions. So far one person has signed up. George Martin has been leading bird walks for the Fords Colony birders for about 2 months using similar Covid protocol. He's been getting 3 -5 participants.

Virginia Breeding Bird Atlas 2: Shirley Devan reported that the field work of collecting data from 2016 – 2020 is almost done. There is a huge database at eBird that now needs to be assembled, analyzed and published so it can be accessible to scientists, birders and decision makers. This will take another 4 -5 years and cost approx. \$300,000. The Dept of Wildlife Resources will not be contributing as much as they did for the field work. The VSO has been asking bird clubs and members across the state to make a contribution. Our bird club has made a VBBA2 contribution but further monies is needed from members. Shirley stressed that local organizations are volunteered operated and all the money goes toward the project and not to salaried staff as in big nature organizations. She asked that we please consider making a donation.

Cheryl concluded the meeting with a raffle of 5 lbs. of bird seed donated by Dean Shostak. The person who answered what was the topic of last month's presentation won.

Cheryl Jacobson adjourned the meeting at 8:36 pm

Respectfully submitted,
Cathy Millar, Secretary,
Williamsburg Bird Club
September 19, 2020