

KFN Partners with Nature Canada on Purple Martin Project – volunteers wanted!

There are many mysteries surrounding the life history of the Purple Martin that make it a fascinating species to study.

In case you didn't know, the Purple Martin is part of a guild of species called aerial insectivores that feed on flying insects. Other examples include swifts, swallows, fly-catchers, nightjars, and Whip-poor-wills. Purple Martins breed throughout North America and migrate to Brazil for the winter. West of the Rocky Mountains they nest predominately in natural cavities such as old woodpecker holes. However, east of the Rocky Mountains they nest almost exclusively in apartment-like nest houses provided by their human 'landlords'.

Aerial insectivores (including the Purple Martin) are in serious trouble, especially in Ontario. They are experiencing widespread population declines, yet the exact cause remains unclear. Many possible culprits have been suggested including environmental threats along their migratory route and at their wintering grounds, mortality from decrease in food availability, inability to adapt to climate change, as well as exposure to pesticides and wind power projects. To add to the mystery, population declines follow a geographic pattern and are most pronounced in the north-east of North America. The population of Purple Martin has been declining at a rate of 5 – 7.5% annually in the lower Great Lakes/St. Lawrence region.

We must work quickly to learn more about the Purple Martin and related species in order to help recover their populations. For this reason, Nature Canada is partnering with many individuals and organizations in Eastern Ontario including the Kingston Field Naturalists and researchers at York and Manitoba Universities, as part of an international effort to protect and recover declining Purple Martin populations.

The goal of the Eastern Ontario Purple Martin Project is to address knowledge gaps in the species life-cycle by determining their local, regional, and international movements, roost site locations, and post-breeding behaviour. Overall, the project aims to help in the conservation of Purple Martins, with hopes of ultimately aiding all aerial insectivores.

We will be using small tracking devices ("geolocators" or "GPS" tags) to determine where these birds go on migration and throughout the winter to better understand the risks they face away from their summer nest boxes. The risk of this work is minimal. Techniques have been well-refined and the birds will be handled by individuals who are experienced, trained, and certified. The birds will wear the device until we can retrieve them the following year.

Since Purple Martins have such a strong connection with human populations, our work is reliant on partnerships with landlords, community members, and local naturalists like you. By participating in this project, KFN will be contributing directly to the science that is needed to find solutions.

There are many ways that you can become involved. In fact, we are looking for several KFN members to volunteer. We will provide you with on-site training on how to band the birds and install the tracking devices. Ideally, we are looking for dedicated individuals who would be available to monitor the nests before and after field work activities as well as be available next year to help remove the tracking devices.

If you're a Purple Martin Landlord, you can help by granting us permission to work with the Martins on your property. In the event a bird carrying a tracking device should return to nest at your colony, we would hope to capture that bird to recover the device. You can also report to us on the conditions at your colony by monitoring the birds and conducting weekly nests checks (if your house can be safely lowered). We want to know information such as dates of arrival, departure, clutch initiation, hatching, and fledging.

If you would like to know more about how to become involved or have any questions or comments, please feel free to contact your local representative, Kurt Hennige, or Megan MacIntosh, the project coordinator at Nature Canada's office in Ottawa.

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