

Purple Martin Legacy Project

A visit to the Parker River National Wildlife Refuge usually starts at Parking Lot One. Here, in the spring and summer, visitors cannot help but notice the two clusters of gourds that are colonies of Purple Martins. These large, active members of the swallow family are as iconic to the Refuge as is the Snowy Owl in winter. They are easy to observe as they pursue flying insects and are an exciting introduction to the bird life that the Refuge is noted for. At the deck beside the colonies there is signage detailing the importance of these birds.

The Friends of the Parker River National Wildlife Refuge has initiated a project that will expand this colony and thereby perpetuate their presence on the refuge. In all actuality this is a legacy project. About thirty or forty years ago there were up to a dozen colonies of Purple Martins down the length of the island. Over the years the colonies dwindled, as their housing, which were large wooden bird houses, succumbed to the ravages of time and weather. The refuge would have lost these colonies if it were not for Sue McGrath, who stepped in and replaced the old decaying structures with a new system of gourd houses. Lighter and plastic, these gourds were much easier to handle and more impervious to the weather. Through Sue's efforts there are now two thriving colonies on the refuge, and another located at the north end of the island at the site of the former refuge headquarters.

We are not introducing something new, but instead are intending to continue the work that she has advanced. Our goal is to attempt to restore the legacy of the past years when the Purple Martins were a presence the length of the refuge. We are starting slowly and cautiously by planning to add an additional colony on the refuge, at a site to be determined.

You can help in this endeavor that aims to strengthen and extend the nesting Purple Martin colonies.

As a part of this project we also hope to recruit volunteers to aid in maintaining and documenting the progress of any new colony. Be sure to check this website for the progress of this project.

We are now raising funds from those who love and value these birds. Any donation, large or small, will be greatly appreciated and is tax deductible. If you wish to help this noble project please send a check of any amount made out to Friends of the Parker River NWR and in the memo line write Purple Martin. Then mail it to

Friends of the Parker River NWR
6 Plum Island Turnpike
Newburyport, Massachusetts 01950.