

January 2002

# LEE COUNTY WILDLIFE ASSOCIATION NEWS



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## Attracting and Maintaining Purple Martins

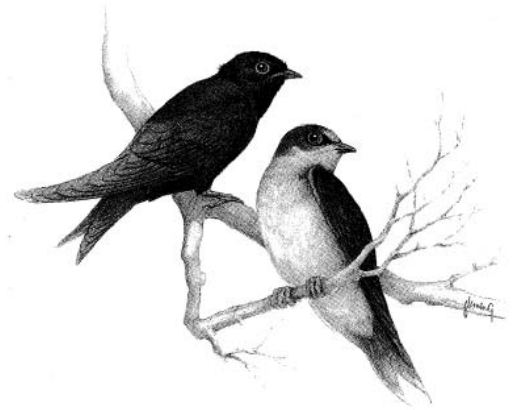
Purple Martins, the largest of North America's swallows, originally nested in natural cavities such as woodpecker holes. The species has now become almost entirely dependent on multi-chambered "martin houses" put up on poles in yards and near fields and human dwellings. Martin houses can be elaborate or simple. The first martins arrive from South America to our Gulf Coast in early February. Adults have a strong fidelity to sites at which they previously nested. Males generally arrive at nest sites before females. Yearling birds begin arriving 4 to 6 weeks after the adults, and these are the most likely to be looking for new and unoccupied houses.

### **Location is everything**

Martins have very specific space requirements. Martin houses should be in the center of an open area, at least 30 feet from human houses. There should be no trees within at least 30 feet, and the farther from trees the better. The air space immediately around the housing, at the height of the housing, should be free of trees in at least two directions, so that the martins can fly to and from the housing in nearly level flight. Housing height should be about 10 to 15 feet.

### **Don't Open Housing Too Early**

As stated earlier, martin yearlings (last year's young) are the ones that



colonize new sites, and they begin arriving about 4 weeks after the first adults. At new sites, opening housing as soon as the adults arrive decreases chances of attracting martins by giving house sparrows and starlings a month to claim the site before the yearlings arrive. For this area, adults should arrive around the first week of March. Martin migration is drawn-out, with birds arriving over a span of 16 to 20 weeks. Martins can arrive and begin nesting as late as June, so keep your housing ready; don't close it up, or let other birds use it. Successful martin landlords do not tolerate non-native competitors.

### **Use Proper Housing**

You must tend the housing each year, so choose a pole that telescopes or is equipped with a winch. Housing should have easily accessible compartments. White housing seems to attract martins best and keep nestlings cooler.

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## Guard against Predators and Nest Site Competitors

Raccoons, rat snakes, crows, and owls are all potential predators. Don't lose all your martins because you didn't protect against predation. External guards are available that protect against owls, hawks, and crows. All martin poles, whether wood or metal, must have climbing animal barriers. You can install guards before or after your martins have arrived.

## Keep Housing in Good Repair

After your martins have left in the fall, remove nests and clean the housing before storing for the winter. Martin housing will last longer if stored indoors over the winter. If you leave housing outside, plug the holes. Otherwise, house sparrows and starlings will claim it in late winter.

## Educate Yourself and Enlighten Others

Visit [www.purplemartin.org](http://www.purplemartin.org), the Purple Martin Conservation Association's (PMCA) web site, talk with other landlords, and read PMCA's "Enjoying Purple Martins More" and/or "Stokes' Purple Martin Book". Martin landlords love to talk about their birds. Stop and introduce yourself to other landlords, and make some new friends. By promoting good management, you can help increase martin numbers locally. And, if you can help area landlords become better educated and more involved in management, you'll assure a better supply of fledglings each season to help martin populations thrive.



## Native Grass Restoration

By: Allen Wolf



In April of 2001, 25+ acres were seeded with several varieties of native grasses on the Allen Wolf place located in the South Lee Wildlife Area. This project was done through the help of Texas Parks and Wildlife's new Landowner Incentive Program (LIP).

The entire program involved a 50-acre plot which was fenced and had cedar removed by either dozer or saw. Plantable areas were sprayed with roundup and several weeks later planted with native seed using a drill equipped with three seed boxes designed for

native grass seed. Some of the freshly dozed areas that were inaccessible by drill were broadcasted. Approximately 10 acres that had small trees and underbrush have been set aside from planting and a prescribed burn will be done on this acreage in the early part of 2002, if possible.

To date, a wide variety of results has been achieved, from excellent to poor. Soil types vary in this area and some of the soil had been cultivated land years ago. The best results were on virgin soil. Plants and grasshoppers all came up about the same time and this accounted for a high amount of loss in some areas. Those areas with fair to good stands withstood the drought in July and a lot of the grass is producing seed in the first year. Side oats produced an abundant amount of seed. Switch grass, Yellow Indian grass and Eastern Gamagrass also seeded this year. Some varieties such as bluestem are still unidentifiable. No weed control was done, as recommended by TPW. This furnished shade for young plants through the hot dry period, however with the late rain in August and September, weeds have grown out of proportion.

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This has certainly been a learning process for all involved in this project and we are looking forward to the coming spring to see what may germinate at that time, since native seeds tend to lay dormant for a long period of time. No grazing will be done on this plot for two years. At that time rotational grazing will be done on a recommended basis. Deer have already returned to this area and it is hopeful that turkey in the area will also be attracted in the coming year.

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## Big Buck Contest for Association Members Only

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The Directors of the Lee County Wildlife Association have decided to host a big buck contest this year. Prizes will be awarded in four categories. Bucks taken in Lee County with (1) firearm, and (2) archery, and animals taken anywhere outside of Lee County by (3) archery, (4) firearm. To be eligible you must have been a member since

September 29, 2001. The animals will be displayed and prizes will be awarded at the annual meeting on Friday, February 1 at the Sons of Herman Hall in Giddings. Winners will be based on gross Boone and Crockett Scores in each category. The deadline for getting your racks to me for measuring is January 23. Even if you don't think your deer will win, we would like to show everyone what quality animals are being produced in Lee County.

Any youth that harvested a deer this year is encouraged to enter the **Texas Big Game Award Program** which recognizes individuals with a nice certificate for harvesting a big game animal or any first time big game harvest. For information contact Greg Pleasant.

The main speaker for this years annual meeting will be Dr. Mike Masser, an Extension Fisheries Specialist and Assistant Professor at Texas A&M . He will be speaking about farm pond design, management, stocking and aquatic weed control.

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## Let Them Grow Up

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Lee County isn't lacking in genetic quality in the deer herd, we just need to let them grow up. Texas Parks and Wildlife Biologists monitor the age weight and antler data of deer harvested each year across the state, and nearly 80 percent of the bucks that are harvested are 1.5 or 2.5 years old.

The buck harvest in the Post Oak Savannah region of Texas has been excessive for more than thirty years, with some of the highest hunter densities in the state. The average inside spread of a 3.5 year old buck in this part of the state is 13 inches and the approximate distance between the ears of a buck (tip to tip) is 13 inches. This can aid hunters in determining the age of the buck before they decide whether or not to shoot. Other than mature bucks, spikes and lesser antler quality animals are fine to harvest.

With proper habitat management and by increasing the age within the buck segment of the population we will produce a healthier herd with improved buck/doe ratios and higher fawn production.

If I can help you with your habitat management, harvest recommendations, or aging and scoring your animals please contact me. My office is in the Wilson Boyd Building in Lexington. Stop by or call me at 979-773-9043.

*Greg Pleasant, Texas Parks & Wildlife Biologist*



## Build Your Own Free-Choice Deer Feeder For Under \$100



Year-round supplementation of deer nutrition can increase fawn production, body size and antler size. For maximum effectiveness, all sex and age classes must use the food. Free-choice feeders prevent competition with other deer and hogs as with timed feeders. A feeder that will

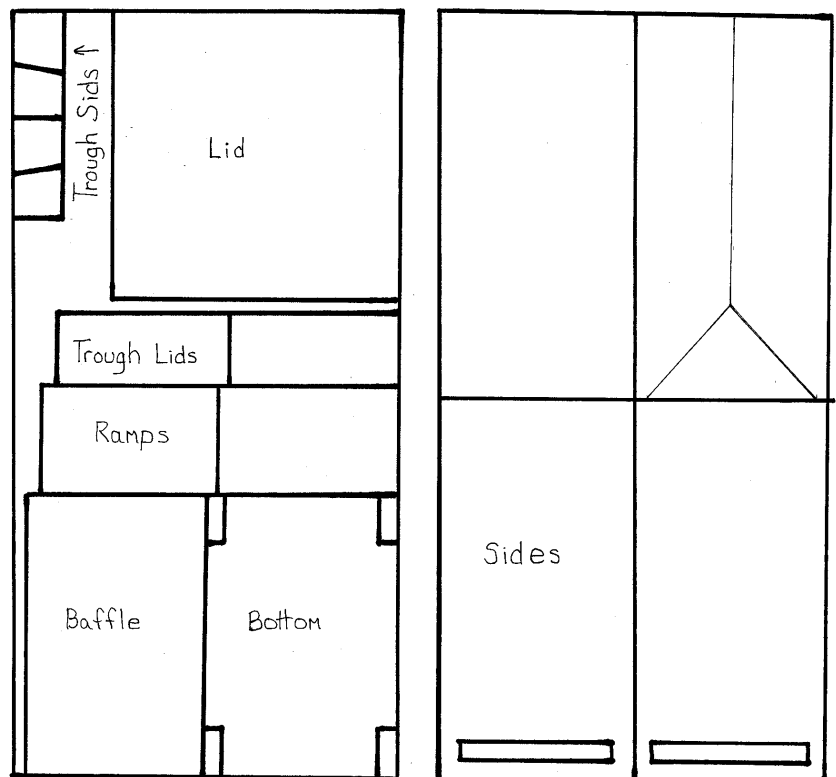
feed grain, beans, or pellets where deer can eat as much as they need when ever they want is preferred. That is why free-choice feeders are recommended. If you are a bit of a do-it-yourselfer you can build your own feeder to save a little money and get many years of enjoyment of attracting wildlife to your property. I copied this design from a feeder that one of the Association members has been using for years. If you would like a more detailed set of plans for this feeder contact me. Once again this shows how we can benefit from cooperation with fellow wildlife enthusiasts. This feeder has a removable center baffle that will allow you to feed two types of feed at the same time.

### Materials

- 1 sheet  $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch plywood
- 1 sheet  $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch plywood
- 24 feet of 2x2
- 24 feet of 1x2
- 2 8-foot pieces of  $1\frac{1}{2}$ -inch angle iron
- 1 10-foot length of  $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch rebar
- 2 Tee hinges
- 1 latch (coon proof)
- 1 tube of caulk
- 1 pound  $1\frac{1}{2}$ -inch drywall screws
- 1 gallon of paint

### Cut list

- 4 sides from  $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch plywood 24"x 48" with feed opening  $2\frac{1}{2}$ "x $19\frac{1}{2}$ " (2" from bottom)
- 1 bottom 24"x36" with corners cut out  $2\frac{1}{4}$ "x $6\frac{1}{2}$ " (dimensions between cut-outs  $19\frac{1}{2}$ " and 23")
- 1 baffle  $22\frac{1}{2}$ "x36" (removable/optional)
- 2 feed ramps  $15\frac{1}{2}$ "x23"
- 2 trough lids 8"x21"
- 4 trough sides 6"wide x 6"tall at front x  $6\frac{3}{4}$ " tall at back (sloped to shed rain)
- 1 lid 36"x36"
- Each leg is made from 4-foot angle iron with welded cross-braces of rebar. Trough should be roughly 24" above ground.
- 2 x 2 framing under the bottom, ramps, along inside corners of sides, and on the underside of lid to fit around the box.
- 1 x 2 to form grooves for baffle and along bottom front edge of trough.



## Buck Scoring Opportunity - January 12

Texas Parks & Wildlife Biologist Greg Pleasant will be at Goodson Lumber Company on Saturday, January 12 to score any deer that coop members would like to enter into the TGBA **Big Buck Contest**. If you have a deer you would like to enter, please bring it between the hours of 9:00 a.m. and 12:00 p.m

### As the Crow Flies

by Jim Dillard, TPWD



I'll never forget the winter I spent up in the Panhandle in Wheeler, Texas. If there was one crow in that country there was a million. It was like a scene right out of Alfred Hitchcock's "The Birds". Every evening around sundown, long streaming lines of crows came from miles and miles in all directions, heading for their roost in a shinnery mott somewhere south of town. Their flight was fluid, like a river flowing over unseen boulders beneath the surface, rising and falling in the wind but straight to their nocturnal roost. The ruckus they made greeting each other could be heard for miles around as they seemed to have plenty to crow about. It's pretty obvious where the old saying "as the crow flies" comes from if you've ever watched crows coming and going. They seldom detour once they've set their course.

The American crow, *Corvus brachyrhynchos*, is native to North America, ranging from central Canada to the Gulf States. They're close kin to ravens, magpies, and jays. Some northern birds drift south during the winter forming large communal aggregations like those I've witnessed in the Panhandle. In west Texas, they're replaced by the common raven (*C. corax*) and the Chihuahaun raven (*C. cryptoleucus*).

Crows are a familiar sight and sound here in north Texas and usually the first bird I hear when I'm out in the country, *caw-caw-cawing* from somewhere off in the distance. They have several calls used to communicate crow to crow. Hawks and owls discovered by crows are usually mobbed and tormented with strafing raids and really mad crow sounds, forcing them to leave the area.

They're found just about everywhere there's open fields, croplands, and woods where they can use their omnivorous eating style to make a living. We probably have more crows today than in the past as a lot of land in the United States has been put into cultivation, cleared, and developed. City crows can eek out a living scavenging garbage and other edibles found there. They're not picky and will literally eat anything including grains, fruits, berries, insects, invertebrates, small mammals, snakes, snails, bird eggs, garbage, and carrion. Crows seldom tempt fate when dining on road-kill cuisine by taking just one more bite like buzzards do as that 18 wheeler approaches at 75 mph and wind up road-kill themselves. I don't think I've ever seen a crow run over – they're much too smart for that.

Crows are about 18 inches tall with large feet they use for perching, grasping, and hopping. Their tail is fan shaped. The bill is all purpose and tough as steel. It's used to hammer, chisel, crack, probe, split, and tear, sorta like a, you guessed it - "crowbar". Both sexes are black so it takes one to know who's who. They mate for life and can live 7-8 years in the wild and up to 30 in captivity. Their bulky stick nests are usually built high up in trees at the base of a branch along the trunk. From this "crow's nest" vantage point, the female lays 4-6 dull blue-green eggs, blotched with brown and gray. Incubation takes 18 days and young stay in the nest 4 to 5 weeks, being tended by both parents and other "helper" crows. I've seen owls use old abandoned crow nests for their own.

Crows are one of the most intelligent of all birds. Their eagle-eye vision and extreme wariness makes them hard to sneak up on. They seem to know exactly the range of most shotguns and stay beyond it. "Scare-crows" don't seem to work either, and if anything, a smart crow will figure out they only mean there's food to be had, so "come on down!". Pet crows have even been trained to mimic the human voice. By the way, a flock of crows is called a "murder" for you trivia buffs.

In Texas, crows are classified as unprotected birds and may be controlled without state or federal depredation permits where found committing or about to commit depredations on ornamental or shade trees, agricultural crops, livestock, or wildlife, or when concentrated in numbers and in a manner that constitutes a health hazard or other nuisance. A hunting license is required.

We've all had to retract a statement or admit an error – around here that's called "eating crow". I know, I do it often. Some people take a sip of "Old Crow" from time to time – around here that's called "drinking crow". And don't worry about those "crow's feet" around the corner of your eyes, they're only a sign of wisdom. But there's lots to be said about the virtues of the crow, like steering a straight path "as the crow flies" when you're traveling, keeping your head up in the wind and your eye glued to the ground, and crow about something every now and then, even when you don't have a reason. Until next time – I'll see you down the road and God Bless America.