

A Father and Son Find Common Ground Through a Most Unlikely Source, the Purple Martin

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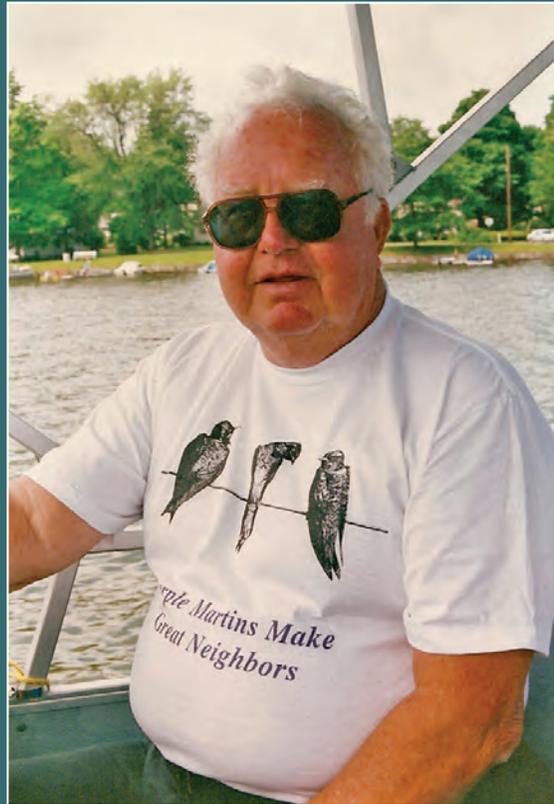
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A Poignant Story About a Father and His Son

On December 11, 2010, my father, James R. Hill, Jr., passed away at the age of 90. He was a retired high school teacher who taught History and Current Events, two of his great passions. He also ran a summer boat livery and campground called "Indianhead Landing" on the picturesque shores of Edinboro Lake in Edinboro, PA. *Indianhead* is where my father let me start my first Purple Martin colony back in 1981. That colony still thrives to this day and serves as one of the main research sites for the *Purple Martin Conservation Association (PMCA)*, which I founded in 1987, 25 years ago.

The story of my relationship with my father is a poignant one. It wasn't always smooth sailing between the two of us, as is probably typical of many father-son relationships. A modestly religious man, my father got so miffed at *Penn State University* after I earned my Master's Degree in Ecology and Wildlife Management from there in 1982, that he half jokingly wanted to sue them. He was disgruntled that he had sent his good Protestant son there for an expensive education and got back an "intellectual kook" who was now spouting non-stop rhetoric about evolution, natural selection, survival of the fittest, and environmentalism. It didn't help the situation that it took me seven years to get the degree when it normally only takes two. He thought I was seriously unfocused in my career pursuits when I allowed myself to become lured away from my university thesis studies on the Barn Swallow before finishing, to spend 6 weeks in the Hawaiian Islands working with endangered honeycreepers. Or the second time I left school to spend three months in the Galapagos Islands spelunking into lava tubes to dig for fossilized Darwin Finch bones underneath ancient Barn Owl roost ledges. But my father seriously questioned my decision making when I left *Penn State* a third time before finishing the degree, for a three-year position with *Dartmouth College* in-



1993

The late James R. Hill, Jr., father of Purple Martin Conservation Association Founder, James R. Hill, III. This photo shows Jim Hill proudly wearing a PMCA tee-shirt as he drives his pontoon boat around Edinboro Lake. Jim Hill generously bequeathed \$30,000.00 to the PMCA, his son, Jamie's, Purple Martin organization.

man who had to move back into the family home because I was totally broke and had no job prospects. But when I announced that I wanted to start a non-profit conservation organization to help the Purple Martin, my father had finally had enough of my wanderlust and unrealistic pipe dreams. He told me I would never make a success of this endeavor. That I would never earn a living doing it, and that I needed to settle down and get a real job with my college and graduate degrees, like running the *Edinboro Coin Laundromat* that happened to be for sale! I kid you not. My father just didn't understand my life's passions and thought that running a laundromat would be the perfect profession for me. But you have to understand where my father was coming from. By the time he was my age, he had been married for 13 years, had three children, had been teaching at the same high school for over a decade, and had built his own successful side business, *Indianhead Landing*.

vestigating the role that songbirds play in the control of insects within the forested mountain ecosystem of northern New Hampshire.

I think I may have finally made my father happy when I finished the graduate degree, got a respectable job at the *Pittsburgh Aviary* 100 miles south of the childhood home, and stayed with that one job for three years, demonstrating a shred of adult maturity. I don't think he and my mom were too thrilled, however, when I would come home most summer weekends to sleep on their couch and mooched meals just so that I could watch, study, and photograph my beloved Purple Martins at the *Indianhead* colony site.

Then, in 1985, I announced to my father that I was quitting my lucrative job at the *Pittsburgh Aviary*, selling my car, and moving to Brazil for 6 months so that I could study the winter roosting habits of Purple Martins on an entirely self-funded project. He just shook his head in total disbelief! At least he drove me to the airport.

When I returned to the United States after living in Brazil for half a year, I was a 35-year-old, single

Purple Martins: A Bridge to Common Ground

Despite my father not believing in my dream of starting the *Purple Martin Conservation Association*, I understood the hobby and the obsessiveness of its followers well enough to know with almost complete certainty that I could carve out a niche and make such an organization a success. So, in 1986, the summer I returned from my martin studies in Brazil, I started laying the foundation for the martin organization I envisioned. I began by sending out fund-raising letters to the many martin enthusiasts with whom I had built personal relationships. By early 1987, I had enough seed money to found the *Purple Martin Conservation Association*, a 501(C)3 tax-exempt charity, and slowly grew it over the next few years to 6500+ dues-paying members, with 7 full-time employees, and an annual budget close to a million dollars. Dad got to see me publish and edit the *Purple Martin Update* (the PMCA's slick, quarterly membership magazine), conduct cutting edge Purple Martin research, and attract international attention to the organization, the bird, and to myself. Dad even got to meet Sir David Attenborough when the *British Broadcasting Corporation* came to his *Indianhead Landing* twice to film documentaries on me and our Purple Martin colony. My father also got to witness me become an entrepreneur just like him, when I designed the SuperGourd for nesting martins and started *Bird Abodes*, a successful, for-profit side business of my own.

Over the years, I succeeded in getting my father invested in my martin work by having him help me paint martin houses, poop the baby martins before banding, conduct nest checks by recording data on Project MartinWatch forms, and put address labels on *Purple Martin Updates*. His favorite task was changing the video tapes on the PMCA's first-ever, internal gourd cam, where he got to see and hear baby martins hatch, be fed, and grow inside their nesting

gourds. Before I knew it, dad was proudly wearing PMCA tee-shirts around all summer long, instead of his own *Indianhead Landing* staff shirts. Now that really says something!

In 2009, a year before dad died, he confided to me that he wanted to leave some of his estate to charity and asked me what

organizations I felt were worthy. I answered: "the *Nature Conservancy*, the *National Audubon Society*, *Hawk Mountain Sanctuary*," and after an appropriate pause, accompanied with a wink and a mischievous grin, I added, "and the PMCA."

The day after dad died in 2010, we were going through his papers and found his latest Will. There were TWO big surprises in his Will. The first surprise was that he DID leave some money to the PMCA (\$30,000.00, along with monies for several other educational charities). The second big surprise was that his Will was drawn up in the year 2000, not 2009 as expected! I was deeply touched when I realized that the date of his Will meant that I had long ago earned the respect of my father, that he actually did value my life's work with Purple Martins, and that in the end, he chose to support my life's vision. What greater gift could a father leave to his only son? Thank you dad for believing in me and supporting my brainchild even though I chose a path in life that didn't exactly follow in your footsteps.



James R. Hill, III

On of the ways PMCA Founder, James R. Hill, III, got his father involved in his crazy Purple Martin obsession, was to have him paint the colored trim on the PMCA's wooden research houses, participate in nest checks, and help band baby martins. In this photo we see a snooping subadult male martin.



Frances Skelton Hill, 1951

The late James R. Hill, Jr., in 1951, holding new his son, James R. Hill, III, who would grow up to become an ornithologist specializing in Purple Martins.

James R. Hill, III, is the 61-year-old Founder and Executive Director Emeritus of the Purple Martin Conservation Association. Jamie retired from active duty at the helm of the PMCA in 2005 after 18 years of service and has had his head in the swamps ever since. For the past 7 years, he's been living out his other big dream, searching for the possibly-extinct, Ivory-billed Woodpecker. True to form, his father thought his Ivory-bill pursuits were yet another kooky idea and waste of time. Jamie is hoping to prove his father wrong this one last time. Jamie maintains a martin colony at his home in Waterford, PA.

