

Gourds or Houses

Which are Better for Purple Martins?

James R. Hill, III, Founder & Executive Director Emeritus
 Purple Martin Conservation Association
 301 Peninsula Dr., Suite 6
 Erie, PA 16505
 martininfo@purplemartin.org

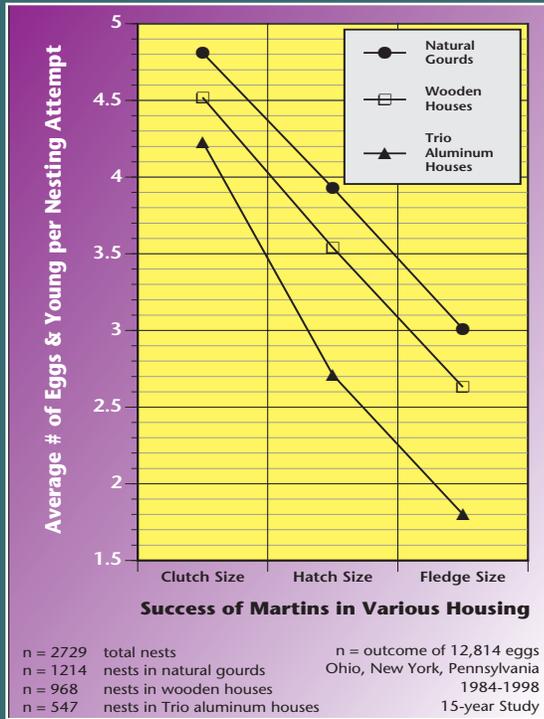


Fig. 1. The relative breeding success of Purple Martins nesting in natural gourds, wooden houses, and unmodified Trio/Duracraft* metal houses. By all 3 measures of breeding success, martins did best in natural gourds. Modern plastic gourds were not yet widely available during the time span of this study. This 15-year study was conducted by the Purple Martin Conservation Association over a 3-state area and followed the outcome of 2729 martin nests.

The Test

In his zeal to promote his company's aluminum Purple Martin houses, J. L. Wade, owner of *Nature House, Inc.*, of Griggsville, IL, and manufacturer of the Trio* and DuraCraft lines of martin houses, once sent press releases to the nation's newspapers imploring martin hobbyists everywhere to return to its place of purchase, any martin housing that wasn't manufactured by his company. He was especially adamant in his attacks against those who professed to care about Purple Martins, yet promoted gourds as martin housing. He claimed that gourds, as well as most martin housing made by other manufacturers, were so inadequate as martin domiciles that they rarely fledged any young since most would fall out prematurely and end up on the ground as "dog and cat food."

Because Mr. Wade's anti-gourd/pro-Trio martin house claims were not backed by any research data, the Purple Martin Conservation Association (PMCA) thought it would be interesting to put his claims regarding the relative merits of various types of martin housing to a scientific test. The PMCA took their 15-year database of 2729 active Purple Martin nests and statistically compared the relative reproductive success of martins nesting in wooden houses, unmodified Trio/DuraCraft aluminum houses, and natural gourds. If,

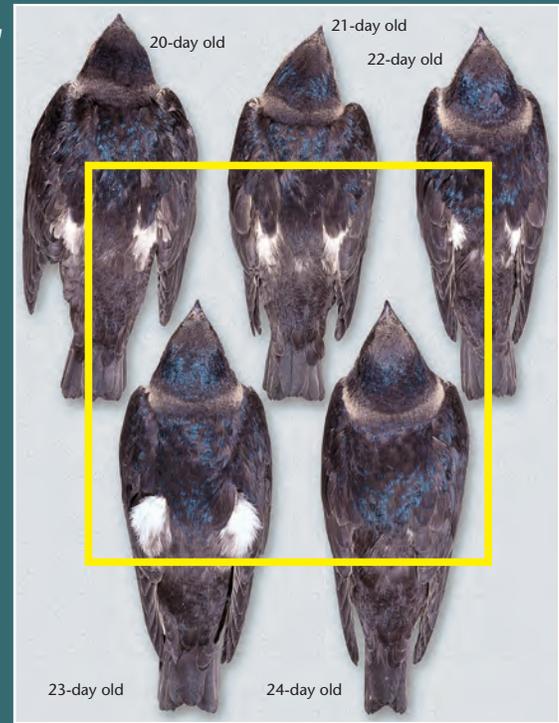


Fig. 2. A 6" x 6" square drawn to scale over the top of five nestling Purple Martins, demonstrating the floor size of the unmodified Trio aluminum houses tested in this 15-year study. Imagine a brood of six martin nestlings and their two parents (= 8 martins) having to cram into a compartment this size. Ideally, martin house compartments should be at least twice this large, especially since a full-sized nestling is 7" long.

as Mr. Wade claims, any of these three housing types differed in how good or bad they were for nesting Purple Martins, one would expect to find measurable differences in the breeding success of martins using them. And that's exactly what the PMCA found.

The results of this analysis are shown in Fig. 1. Contrary to Mr. Wade's claims, these data showed that in every measure of reproductive success, Purple Martins fared best when nesting in gourds, and fared least well when nesting in Trio aluminum houses. There were many reasons for these results (and you should read the full report*), but basically, martins nesting in gourds have higher nesting success because gourds are roomier, drier, less vulnerable to predators, and have fewer nestling fallouts than Trio houses.

*The Trio/DuraCraft aluminum martin houses tested in this study were the latest models, but unfortunately, Nature House, Inc., hasn't changed its basic 6" x 6" house designs since they were originally introduced in the early 1960's. This is like driving a car with 50-year-old technology and, not surprisingly, the martins' breeding success in unmodified Trio/Duracraft houses reflects this. To read the complete research report, visit the PMCA's web site at <www.purplemartin.org>. Look under Update 8(4) archives.





James R. Hill, III



Purple Martins Love Gourds



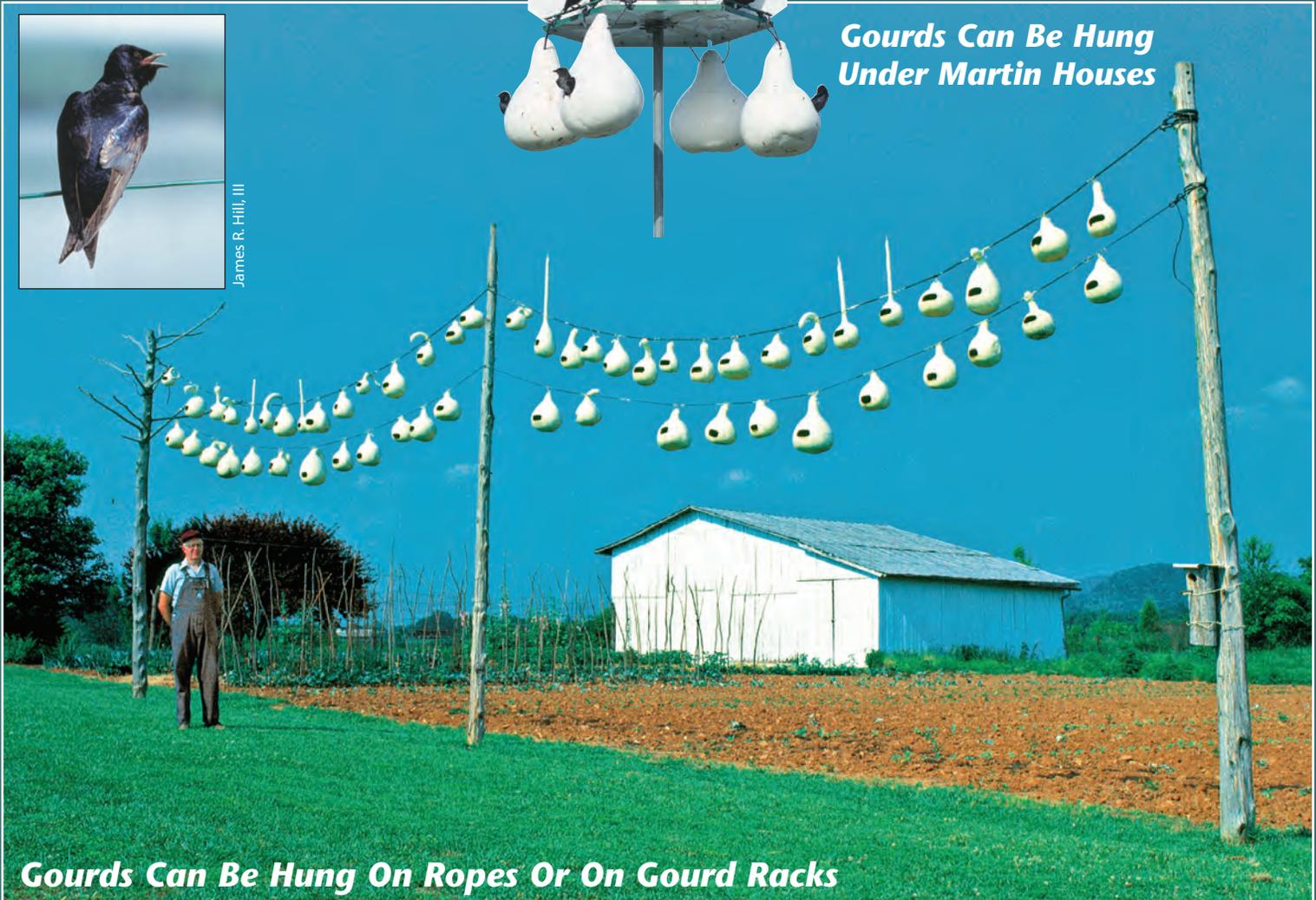
James R. Hill, III



James R. Hill, III



Gourds Can Be Hung Under Martin Houses



Gourds Can Be Hung On Ropes Or On Gourd Racks

James R. Hill, III

James R. Hill, III