

Ralph K. Bell: A Lifelong Friend to Martins

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Being a good Purple Martin landlord requires patience, dedication, knowledge and, most of all a passion for martins. Not surprising, many people who have these qualities do not limit themselves to caring just about Purple Martins. They are interested in other birds as well, and often they themselves are interesting people who contribute much to the conservation of birds. Purple Martin landlord Ralph K. Bell of Clarksville, Pennsylvania is certainly one of these people.

As a young boy, Bell knew ornithologist J. Warren Jacobs who founded the Jacob's Birdhouse Company, maker of classic wooden martin houses in the early 20th century. Bell credits Jacobs for inspiring him to take a serious interest in birds. Later in his adult life, Bell became a Purple Martin landlord, and he has been a member of the PMCA for many years. He is one of a small number of people, like Ken Kostka, Jeff Hunt and Duke Snyder of the Purple Martin Preservation Alliance, who have worked for years to restore Purple Martin populations in Southwestern Pennsylvania. Like most landlords in the region, Bell lost his entire colony to Hurricane Agnes in 1972. Agnes was a rare, but very powerful and long-lasting June hurricane, hitting Southwestern Pennsylvania during the peak of the nesting season. It took Bell 12 years to get martins back. He currently maintains a colony of 30 martin pairs in Greene County in Southwestern Pennsylvania. A licensed bird bander, Bell bands and color-marks his martins with assistance from his daughter Joan Pattison. Bell reports

martin scout arrival dates, and in recent years he was in on the hunt for a small, elusive martin roost in his area.

In addition to his Purple Martin work, Bell surveys four blocks (about 40 square miles) for the 2nd Pennsylvania

Breeding Bird Atlas, participates in various bird counts like the Christmas Bird Count, and still bands birds at his farm and at Dolly Sods, West Virginia where he established a major migration banding station in 1958. Bell continues to mentor and inspire other birders, modestly sharing his lifetime accumulation of knowledge. Not bad work for someone who is 92!

Bell has been a cornerstone of ornithology in Southwestern Pennsylvania for decades. Recently, in recognition of his lifelong contributions to bird conservation, a number of honors were bestowed on him. The Greene County Conservation District recognized him for 20 years of service to the District Board. The PMCA and the Purple Martin Preservation Alliance recognized him for his work with Purple Martins, and the Pennsylvania Game Commission recognized him for a lifetime of conservation work in Pennsylvania. Area birders have formed the Ralph Bell Bird Club in his honor. And, finally, in a fitting testament of respect and

esteem, his fellow martin workers have honored Bell by naming Southwestern Pennsylvania's only known Purple Martin roost after him.

Ralph, thank you for all that you have done for Purple Martins and other birds. Keep going!



Above: On behalf of the PMCA, member George "Bly" Blystone of Jacob's Birdhouse Company presents Ralph K. Bell with a Certificate of Appreciation for his work with Purple Martins. Photo courtesy of Cindy Baily **Below:** Martins gather at Rohanna Golf Course near the roost site. Photo by George Blystone.

