

# Purple Martin Report 2024

By Cheryl J Jacobson

The Purple Martin Project has been extremely successful this nesting season with 197 birds fledged.

The Project is supported financially by three partners, including the Williamsburg Bird Club, Historic Rivers Chapter of the Virginia Master Naturalist and CVWO. The volunteers who monitor are frequently members of all three organizations, including the Team Leader, Cheryl Jacobson. Co-leader, Shan Gil, is indispensable for his skill in pole assembly and repair as well as aiding me in physical strength required to raise a pole in the air.

Currently, the colonies consist of seven poles with gourds located among four sites: Chickahominy Riverfront Park, Ford's Colony, York River State Park and VIMS. The majority of the fledglings have occurred at two sites where five of the poles are installed: Chickahominy Riverfront Park and Ford's Colony. This success is attributed to the habitat with the abundance of dragonflies.

Two factors impacting the most success of the Project has been predation and habitat disruption York River State Park has been impacted by predation of a Black Rat snake. This year, a pair of Purple Martins established a nest with eggs in one of the gourds and were



Purple Martin colony at Chickahominy Riverfront Park. Photo by Cheryl Jacobson.

followed later by another four Purple Martins who were entering gourds. A snake predated the nest with eggs and was removed, but not before all the birds left. Several weeks later, eight birds started entering the gourds, and one nest was established. Many snake-away strategies were employed in addition to the baffle but were not successful, and again, the nest with eggs was predated and the birds all left. We are exploring additional strategies to prevent snake predation. It should be noted that staff at this location have been very supportive of this project. Volunteers established a large native plant garden near the colony and there has been a significant increase in food supply for all birds, including the Purple Martins.

Habitat disruption resulted in the necessity of moving a pole located at New Quarter Park to Chickahominy Riverfront Park, where there was a need for additional gourds. Cheryl worked with New Quarter Park to establish an agreement to do a no mow area where the colony was

located. Even though this was agreed to, the park staff continued to mow so low there was almost no grass, few plants and no longer any dragonflies or food for birds. Even though this was brought to the attention of park staff many times it was not possible to bring about a change in mowing habits, so it was decided to move the pole.

Of concern was the plan to do a major redesign of the use of space at the Chickahominy Riverfront Park with the removal of vegetation and a hill behind the colony. However, the birds had returned prior to the work commencing and the colony seemed to tolerate the disturbance since nests had already been established. The park staff were very supportive and attempted to minimize disruption while still accomplishing their goals. The work is complete, and the disturbed ground has been replanted with native plants. There is potential for a significant increase in fledgling numbers at this location.

The VIMS location is the only current site where there have been no established nests, although several Purple Martins have been seen exploring the gourds now for two years. There is still hope for this site.

Volunteers have been critical to the success of the project. This has not been an issue as the current group is very committed. The main lead at Ford's Colony moved out of state but because we knew this was coming, other volunteers at that location were trained and committed to taking over the role. A younger gentleman has volunteered to assist when agility and strength are needed. Because the gourds are all lowered at one time, it is important to limit the number of volunteers who are monitoring to lessen the stress on the birds.

The expectation is to see a significant increase in the number of Purple Martin fledglings for the 2025 nesting season.