

“FOR THE BIRDS”

by KEITH A. HAPP

Agronomist, Mid-Atlantic Region, USGA Green Section



These purple martin houses serve a dual role in an integrated pest management program. They blend environmental enhancement with economics; natural insect control and more efficient water management capabilities.

HAVE YOU EVER approached your green committee, owner, or financial officer with a proposal about a long-range capital improvement project? You may have spent weeks preparing the necessary information, only to be shot down. Maybe afterwards you even muttered, “This is for the birds; the project is never going to be funded.”

How about trying the tactic that Don Simpson, golf course superintendent at North Hills Municipal Golf Course, used when he needed to upgrade the irrigation system? He lives by the philosophy “Never say never.” For Don, just saying that a new system was needed, and even presenting supportive documentation, was not enough to ensure that the project could be sold.

The standard irrigation control box (normally made of stainless steel) was a major concern, and ultimately was the hurdle that needed to be negotiated to secure financial approval for the project. There was a perception that the more traditional irrigation field control boxes would visually detract from, and have a negative impact upon, course aesthetics. With the help of an irrigation consultant, it was decided that a radio-controlled irrigation system (OSMAC) would work best at North Hills. The options on how to house these units in the field were carefully considered.

With the help of assistant superintendent Les Utegg (now the superintendent), Don found a way to blend irrigation improvement with integrated pest management. Purple

martin houses were used to shelter the new irrigation control system while also providing nest boxes for the aggressive insect-eating birds. This plan has a unique selling strategy that is difficult to turn down. In a short period of time, a prototype was designed and the project was off and running.

Normal irrigation installation procedures were employed, except for the style of the field control boxes. The standard height for a purple martin house (12 feet above ground) was used. To support the house, a cement base was poured and PVC pipe was used to protect the control wires. The support pole for the birdhouse/controller was fashioned from cedar, which resists weather deterioration and blends in with the environment.

A door was positioned to allow easy access for inspection of the wire connections and fuses. Regular maintenance or any future repairs can be easily performed.

The wires extend to the receiver through a one-inch PVC pipe mounted in the attic of the two-floored purple martin house. The PVC sleeve serves a dual purpose of housing the control wires and protecting the residents of the house.

Purple martins are migratory birds, and this had to be considered when the house/controller was designed. Annual maintenance, such as cleaning, must be accomplished. Four mounting screws on each side of the structure fit the bill. The roof and each floor can be removed, examined, and cleaned.

Purple martin houses function best when located in open areas, allowing the birds to sweep and feed. At North Hills, a single location controls up to 36 irrigation stations. Material and construction costs were minimized, and the remote locations of the controller/houses allows turf maintenance activities to take place without alarming or discouraging the purple martin colonies.

Don Simpson has been in the turf management business for 53 years and has witnessed firsthand how golf courses can be community assets. Wildlife can coexist with golfers, and even flourish while players enjoy the outdoors. Upon retirement in 1994, Don handed the reigns of the golf course and new irrigation system to his assistant. In addition, he passed along a valuable lesson, one from which we all can learn. Where there is a will, there is a way. So, “never say never.”