



Mendham Golf and Tennis Club is fortunate to have a dedicated and active bird group to monitor their birdhouses. This commitment is a necessary component to manage a successful program on the golf course. From left: Gerald Clendenny, Bill Hintz, Betsy Shapiro, Tom Cohan, Glen Nelson, Nancy Keber, Rusty Maloney. Absent from the picture: Don Heeb, Blythe Fortin, Frank Bell, and Jim Cloninger.

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# Start Your Own Bird Business!

It started with a snowbird leaving birdhouses on a workbench, but it has developed into an important environmental enhancement for a golf course.

BY BILL HINTZ

Seventeen years ago, a Mendham Golf and Tennis Club member built four bluebird houses and a purple martin house and left them on a workbench in the club's maintenance building. He decided he could no longer stand the New Jersey winters and moved to Tucson, Arizona. Like it or not, Mendham was in the bird business.

It was not an auspicious beginning. The three people who started the program knew nothing about birds except

what they had learned as children, and they made every mistake in the book. They nailed the bluebird boxes to trees and fence posts and erected the purple martin house in the wrong place. They were surprised when a raccoon ate all the bluebird eggs and they were equally surprised when the purple martins did not come (and would never come) to the site they had selected for them. But they learned by trial and error and were helped immensely by the counsel they received from the nation's two

great songbird associations — the Purple Martin Conservation Association and the North American Bluebird Society. Add the hands-on help they got from their central New Jersey mentor, Tim Shaheen, and the program grew from the initial disaster in 1992 to fledging 194 purple martins, 177 bluebirds, and 98 tree swallows in 2008. Mendham now has 137 nesting sites spread around its golf course, and the group of dedicated members who monitor these sites each week during



the nesting season has grown from three to 11.

Although its program started as a project that would give three old retired guys something worthwhile to do, it has been beneficial to the club in many ways. Perhaps Mendham wouldn't have received its Audubon Cooperative Sanctuary Program Certification in 2008 without a bird program. The certification involves many stringent requirements other than protecting bird habitat, but having an extensive bird program certainly didn't hurt.

Quite apart from its successes with birds, Mendham, like so many golf courses today, has become an environmental jewel. Located less than 40 miles from New York City, it literally is a stunning oasis amidst the widening urban sprawl. There are foxes in its fields, and a black bear, of all things, knocked down three bluebird houses last spring! Whitetail deer, rabbits, and squirrels abound. The ponds and streams are full of fish, and a recent bird survey identified 83 different species on its 165-acre property. The golf course and surrounding community reap the rewards of sound environmental programs put in place by a



In addition to monitoring the purple martins, several bluebird houses are monitored throughout the golf course. Golfers enjoy the brilliant flash of blue as the birds forage for insects.

series of forward-looking green committees and installed by the very competent golf course superintendent, Chris Boyle.

Mendham's membership is heavily involved with birds. Purple martins arrive early in April and return to Brazil in August. They are here during the major part of the golf season, and members have become very aware of them. Their colony is located adjacent to the 11th green, and the birds provide a pleasant backdrop of chirping and frantic flights in and out of their nesting gourds as they feed their young. When the birds leave in August, an eerie, almost palpable silence descends on the area that puzzles the members

until they realize that *their* birds have completed another nesting cycle and are on their way back to Brazil.

But before they leave, one of the largest non-golf events of the year, Bird Day at Mendham, takes place. On an early July Monday morning, when the golf course is closed, parents, grandparents, and children ages 5-15 gather to learn about purple martins, bluebirds, and tree swallows. The event has become extremely popular, and this year 93 people attended. Tim Shaheen is a licensed bird bander, and after his short talk on purple martin basics, the children are asked to help him band the 20-day-old nestlings. Each child holds at least one baby bird in cupped

hands while Tim affixes the band. The facial expressions of awe and excitement as the kids hold these birds are priceless.

This presentation is followed by a similar talk on bluebirds and tree swallow basics and includes an abbreviated ride on the bluebird trail in golf carts to see these birds in their natural habitat. The program concludes with a hotdog luncheon on the clubhouse patio, and each child is given an Audubon Wild Republic toy bluebird or purple martin as a memento. Our goal is to make the day memorable, particularly for the children. We feel it's important, and perhaps even our responsibility, to interest another generation in protecting the environment that has been so good to us and our golf course.

Managing birds today is a fascinating and rewarding experience, but if you are interested in starting a program like ours, it needs to be done properly.

(Right)  
Tom Coghlan  
raises a group of  
purple martin  
gourds after  
inspection.

(Below)  
From left: Betsy  
Shapiro, Rusty  
Maloney, Glen  
Nelson, and Nancy  
Keber get busy  
with their weekly  
check of each nest  
site. The group  
keeps detailed  
records of the  
nesting purple  
martins and  
bluebirds.



Consider the variables alone in constructing and positioning a bluebird box. The entrance hole has to be 1.25 inches, just large enough to allow a bluebird to enter, but small enough to keep out undesirable predators. The box has to be mounted on its own free-standing pole with sturdy predator guards in place to deter climbing animals, and it needs to be in the open and five feet off the ground. Why five feet? Because if it's higher, it attracts the unwanted sparrow, and if it's lower, housecats can leap four feet to get to the contents of the nest inside. It should not be positioned too close to tree lines or bushes to keep it away from wrens, who will invade the box and either pierce eggs or kill baby birds. On a golf course, the box has to be mounted in out-of-play areas. Golf is a difficult game at best, and the last hazard a member needs is to be stymied by a bluebird box in the short rough. The boxes usually are placed on out-of-bounds lines or in generally remote areas of the golf course.

Positioning the housing for a purple martin colony is even more important. Simply stated, if it's not done right, you won't get birds. Without going into the specifications in detail, these are some general basics. The housing

needs to be in an area of open flyways with few trees and with a pond or stream nearby. Martins eat large flying insects (sorry, no mosquitoes) and need a source of these close by. They like people, and instinctively know that if humans and human traffic are present, there are fewer predators in the area. A building of some sort within 100 feet, and perhaps a cart path passing nearby, are vital requirements.

Like everything else in the food chain, birds need to be protected from things that want to eat them, such as owls. This requires proper predator guards installed on the poles and gourds. These specifications are pretty rigid. There are golf courses in our area that have bent the rules slightly and positioned their housing in picturesque settings. This change makes for a beautiful landscape, but, unfortunately, doesn't get birds.

If a golf course is interested in developing its own bird program, some decisions need to be made. Who, for example, will head it? The natural tendency is to assign the task to the golf course superintendent, but this usually is a mistake, as the superintendent has higher priorities. Birds nest when the grass grows best, and the superintendent's primary responsibility

is to grow and care for grass. It is better to have a club member group of retired people develop a program. People with more time can focus on a single task, and, if they are like the Mendham group, they will be extremely enthusiastic and dedicated. Most important of all, a group of this kind provides the continuity necessary for a successful program. Continuity is important. If a program is started and then abandoned, undesirable birds will take over, giving the whole effort a negative result. Through the years, Mendham's 11-person group has had a turnover of eight, and it is as productive today as it ever was.

Concentrate on just a few species, and don't spread yourself too thin. Mendham works with two species, the purple martin and the bluebird, and we have the tree swallow thrown in for free because they use the same housing as the bluebird. Our 137 nesting sites are really all the bird group can handle, but our superintendent has a couple of bird projects of his own. Alex, a 15-year-old boy and entrepreneur who already knows that he wants to enroll in the school of ornithology at a major university, started a bird-house-building business and called on Chris Boyle, who has a thing for ducks.



Progress of the purple martins can be compared to a growth chart to help determine the age of the young birds.



Success with the next generation!

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The annual Bird Day at Mendham is a popular event for the members and their children to learn about purple martins, bluebirds, and tree swallows. The day also provides the opportunity for children to assist a licensed bird bander as he goes about his work affixing the identifying bands.

Chris hired Alex to build and install a wood duck box and two mallard nesting platforms, and promised him an incentive bonus if his work produced hatchlings. They didn't produce this year because the box and platforms were installed too late, but next year he expects to have ducklings swimming

in the ponds to further beautify the landscape.

Costs are involved in the project. A purple martin gourd rack, complete with predator guards, sells for about \$500 if purchased from the Purple Martin Conservation Association. A bluebird box can be built in a retiree's

workshop or purchased from the North American Bluebird Society for about \$35. Mendham has five martin gourd racks and 77 bluebird boxes, so its bird investment is fairly sizeable, but the equipment has been purchased over a number of years and has been relatively painless. Yet, in our current recessionary economy, club treasurers resist budgeting for these expenditures. We circumvent this by holding an annual nine-hole, Friday afternoon, twilight tournament and supper called This Tournament is for the Birds, where a portion of the tournament fee is dedicated to bird expenses.

It was not so many years ago that America's bird icon, the bluebird, almost became extinct because of the indiscriminate use of pesticides and loss of habitat. As far as the purple martin is concerned, they were so rare in New Jersey that the first time this author heard of one was when he picked up the abandoned house on the maintenance building workbench. Both species are back, healthy, and thriving now because of the intelligent intervention of humans. Purple martins are said to nest exclusively in housing made by humans, and Mendham golfers don't gasp anymore when they see a bluebird on the wing, because it is no longer a rare, isolated occurrence.

But there is more to be done. Golf courses, with their 100-plus acres, are islands of green in an otherwise congested atmosphere and are in a unique position to contribute to a healthy future environment. If you are interested in developing a bird program, let your younger guys continue to work on their golf games a bit longer and give the project to your older folks. The younger chaps will get old soon enough and will get their chance to work with birds too.

*BILL HINTZ is a longtime member of Mendham Golf and Tennis Club (Mendham, N.J.). He has been an instrumental member of "the bird guys" since 1992.*