

## Citizen Science—Thinking Like the Birds

By Gisela Kutzbach, Friends of the Lakeshore Nature Preserve Board Member

During this pandemic, we miss our usual connections with people and places. Citizen Science not only helps us better understand science and learn about the environment, it also connects us with a vast network. A small part of such networks are the Purple Martin House and Biocore Bluebird trail projects sponsored by the Friends of the Lakeshore Nature Preserve, with the goal to provide needed nesting cavities for these declining bird populations. These projects are connecting two enthusiastic teams of twelve monitors—to each other, to local groups and national bird associations, and to the lands of the Preserve. The volunteers follow a weekly schedule of monitoring: they communicate with each other, share successes and challenges, solve problems, analyze data and post them to the Friends website, Preserve staff and larger data analysis centers, and then plan for the next year.

Here is a snapshot of this learning process at the Purple Martin House: In 2017, we installed the beautiful birdhouse, featuring generous cubicle nest compartments, on top of the Biocore Prairie, away from trees and with plenty of insects to catch on the “fly” over the prairie and the close-by lakeshore. That year, the house attracted one breeding couple, followed by two unsuccessful years. The suggestion surfaced to install two hanging gourds from the house, another popular option of Purple Martin housing. We tried to think like the birds. Martins return every year from their wintering place in South America to the same house. The young they raised in the previous year, now subadults, have to find housing on their own. Their parents return more than a month before them, leaving no vacancies in their old home. We reasoned that if these subadults were raised in gourds in one of the area’s longer established martin houses, they might look for gourds after their return.

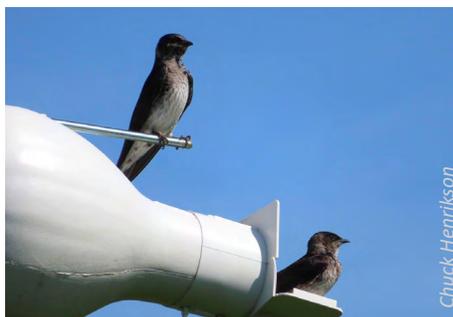
And so it happened. We now have one parent couple breeding and two other martins on the premises. The three nestlings in the roomy gourd are growing their primary flying feathers and are expected to fledge around



Chuck Henrikson



Gisela Kutzbach



Chuck Henrikson



Jeff Koziol



Gisela Kutzbach



Maggi Christianson

**Top to bottom:** Richard Ness lowers the Purple Martin house to check a nest. Adult Purple Martins. Three five-day-old Purple Martin nestlings in a roomy gourd.

**Top to bottom:** Volunteer Maggi Christianson, trains as a Bluebird trail monitor. Bluebirds perch on a nesting box. Five five-day-old Bluebirds in a nesting box.

August 1. We are planning to install two more gourds next year. Once these are filled, we reason, other subadults likely will use the house itself, for martins are social birds and happiest when living in colonies.

Similarly, the Eastern Bluebird trail monitors keep learning about the best options for locating the Bluebird nest boxes. In contrast to Purple Martins, Bluebirds nest by themselves, at least 200 yard from others of their kind. In addition, they are competing with other cavity nesters for the eight trail boxes around the Biocore Prairie, Trees Swallows and House Wrens. Our monitors recognize who is using the boxes by the way the nests differ and by the color of eggs. Location is important, for Bluebirds are choosy, looking for a place to perch nearby and guard their nest and for open space like the prairie offering plenty

of food. This year two boxes were claimed by Bluebirds. So far five have fledged. Over the last 5 years, we have helped increase the once declining Bluebird population in Wisconsin by 50 fledglings.

The Friends’ citizen science projects also help visitors to connect to nature in the Preserve, sparking their interest and providing knowledge about birds. Future fieldtrips sponsored by the Friends, free and open to the public, will further strengthen these connections after COVID-19 restrictions allow is to do so. For more details, visit the [Friends of the Lakeshore Nature Preserve website](https://www.lakeshorepreserve.org/).