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'There's an interest here' | Visitors receive lessons in nature during First Annual Purple Martin and Garden Event

David Gray | The News Jun 17, 2019 Updated 6 hrs ago



A Purple Martin chick waits patiently on a scale before being banded, a process where an identification band is placed around one of the chick's leg to help researchers track migration patterns, during the First Annual Purple Martin and Garden Event at North Park at Saturday, June 1.

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DENHAM SPRINGS -- In the last five years, avian biologist Katie Percy has banded more birds than she can count.

So when she was asked to band a group of Purple Martins in early June, she grabbed her plastic toolbox, took off her sunglasses, and got to work.

[First Annual Purple Martin and Garden Event | Photo Gallery](#)



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Reaching into a gourd rack at North Park, Percy slowly pulled out a small Purple Martin with her left hand, gently gripping it around both sides of the neck. After weighing the palm-sized bird, Percy used her right hand to cut off a small numbered metal tag that she then strapped on the bird's right leg, drawing curious looks from the small group of people huddled around her.

"Fortunately, Purple Martins' legs don't get thicker," said Percy, who's worked with the Louisiana Audubon Society for the last five years. "So the bands will never hurt it.

"But by banding the birds," Percy continued as she started the process with the next Purple Martin, "we can track their movements and their life history, return rates, annual migration and annual survivorship. This can help tell us so many things about the birds."

Everybody learned a little something on this day, when nature lovers flocked to North Park in Denham Springs for the First Annual Purple Martin and Garden Event on Saturday, June 1.

The family-friendly educational program, originally scheduled for May, had to be postponed due to inclement weather.

But the second try ultimately proved to be the charm as dozens of people arrived at the walking path in North Park on a bright, sunny day, ready to take in all things nature.

Several bird and gardening organizations were on hand for the event, educating visitors on their various work. Some of the groups represented included the Denham Springs Garden Club, Louisiana Master Gardeners, Louisiana Master Naturalists of Greater Baton Rouge, and the Capital Area Beekeepers Association.



Attendees of First Annual Purple Martin and Garden Event ask questions to members of the Louisiana Master Naturalists of Greater Baton Rouge at North Park at Saturday, June 1.

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Additionally, the Livingston Parish Library brought its new bookmobile stocked with nature-inspired books for visitors to check out; members of Live Oak High's Environmental Club explained the current agriculture project they made for the Louisiana Envirothon; and bird-inspired student artwork from Eastside Elementary and Freshwater Elementary hung for all to see.

Krista Adams, a local Purple Martin enthusiast who organized the event, said she was pleased with the turnout and hopes it'll lead to similar events in the future.

"There's an interest here, but there's nothing in Denham Springs really like this," Adams said. "Hopefully this will be the first of many times we do this nature event."

Percy, who set up next to the Purple Martin booth, had several avian books and fliers on hand for visitors to peruse and ask questions about. She also explained the banding process, which she said can help track nesting pairs and reproductive rates among birds as well as their flying habits.



A Purple Martin chick with an identification band is displayed during the First Annual Purple Martin and Garden Event at North Park at Saturday, June 1.

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"Because Purple Martins are a migratory species, the [federally-issued and uniquely-numbered] bands keep track of them," she said. "The bands go into a national database, so if anyone recaptures this bird, they can see it was banded at North Park."

Kevin Langley, one of 250 members in the Capital Area Beekeepers Association, brought one of his many backyard hives to North Park, giving visitors a chance to watch the worker bees in action.

Langley, who rescues bees and regularly brings hives to schools for educational programs, said bees pollinate between "30 to 40 percent" of the produce sold in Louisiana grocery stores, making them "a vital" part of our ecosystem. Langley also said Louisiana bees have been sent to California to help pollinate its almond trees.

However, visitors to Langley's booth appeared to have greater interest in the different types of honey he had ready for sampling. But even the honey, Langley explained, has a method to its madness.

"Bees collect pollen and nectar from whatever is in bloom, so honey will taste different based on what time of year it is," said Langley, whose grandfather was also a beekeeper. "There's also the raw unprocessed honey with pollen still inside that people say helps them with sinuses."

Mike Ginn and Annette Escude, both of the Louisiana Master Naturalists of Greater Baton Rouge, brought several footprint molds of various animals, including the black bear, a skunk, an otter, and a possum. They also displayed a turtle shell, a snake's skin, and some of Ginn's bird photography.

One of the birds was the brown booby, a native to the Caribbean that Ginn said he photographed in St. John the Baptist Parish. He also had a photo of a curved-billed thrasher, which he spotted on College Drive in Baton Rouge — about 1,400 miles from its native land of Arizona.

"I call myself the luckiest guy," Ginn said. "I get to sit around and take photographs of all these beautiful animals."

The adults weren't the only ones trying to educate.

Freshwater Elementary students fell in love with Purple Martins so much this school year that teacher Shannon Seal had them write essays centered on the question, "How are Purple Martins unique?"

The essays were displayed across from the Purple Martin tent, giving visitors dozens of summaries about the bird from a child's point of view.



Savannah Huber, 10, models a bee keeper suit with her mother, Amy, during the First Annual Purple Martin and Garden Event at North Park at Saturday, June 1.

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“They didn’t complain to write about something they loved,” Seal said.

Essays about Purple Martins written by Freshwater Elementary second graders were on display during the First Annual Purple Martin and Garden Event at North Park at Saturday, June 1.

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