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linking people to nature on Lasqueti and surrounding islands -Issue #3, Summer 2014

Western Purple Martin, by Sheila Ray

If you are from central or eastern North America you may be familiar with the Purple Martin, the largest member of the swallow family that often nest in condominium style bird houses in backyards and parks. They are a much-loved bird because they are social and eat lots of insects.

The Martins that nest along the coast of British Columbia are a separate subspecies, *Progne subis arboricola*. Historically, these Martins nested in woodpecker holes in old trees or snags. Because of logging, fire prevention, snag removal and agricultural and urban development throughout the Salish Sea, this habitat was lost. Introduced populations of European Starlings and House Sparrows competed for any remaining nest sites. Martins shifted to nesting in woodpecker cavities in old untreated wooden pilings, and as these old pilings fell or were replaced with creosote-treated pilings (and later steel and concrete ones) where woodpeckers could not excavate nest cavities, their numbers steadily declined.

By the early 1980s the BC population of Western Purple Martins was reduced to less than 10 breeding pairs and they were placed on the "red list" of threatened species. In 1986 a volunteer-based nest box program was begun in the Georgia Basin. By 2013 there were 950 nesting pairs in nest boxes from Sooke to Campbell River.

Some of these birds on Vancouver Island have been banded with tiny geolocators, which ride with them on their migration. Returning birds' geolocators re-



Western Purple Martin pair Saturday June 7, False Bay Dock

veal that they had "travelled to a fall roost in Arizona. They then continued on through Central America, northern South America, and into the Amazon Basin, to winter in southeastern Brazil. Returning by the reverse route, their travel clocked up 22,000 km between their southern Vancouver Island summer visits!" (Pincott, Pender Island Conservancy)

Last summer there were two reports of Purple Martins seen in False Bay. So this spring two nest boxes, constructed from plans provided by BC Purple Martin Stewardship and Recovery Program, were put up on the dock in False Bay. Martins have recently been seen at the boxes, so keep your eyes peeled for a large shiny purple swallow. (Not the barn swallows that are nesting in the freight shed, although they are lovely to see too.)

For more information check out the Western Purple Martin Foundation web site. www.saveourmartins.org

Herring in the Bay by Sheila Harrington

This past spring, Lasqueti and many other surrounding areas, such as Denman, Hornby, Qualicum, French Creek and the Sunshine coast experienced a herring spawn the likes of which old time locals say they haven't seen for about 50 years! This brought thousands of sea gulls, eagles, ducks, sea lions and seals to Boat Cove.

Pacific herring (*Clupea pallasii*) was once one of the most abundant fish in the Salish Sea. This forage fish, one of several small species of fish, feed other larger fish, sea mammals, birds and at one time, coastal peoples.

Adult herrings generally reach 8 years old. They can grow between 9-16" long, but today's Pacific herring are considerably smaller (8 - 10") than those that were caught two generations ago (regularly 12-14"). Every spring, adult herring swim to coastal shores to spawn. The females lay an average of 20,000 eggs on seaweed, sea grass, or rocks. The males spread their sperm in the area, turning the ocean a beautiful turquoise colour. This spawn event lasts 2-4 days.

Herring eggs are sensitive to waves and predation by birds, seals and sea lions, although they can withstand periods of dryness when the tides go out. To see live eggs with eyes looking around, check out Terry Brown's cool video made from Powell River: <http://vimeo.com/90279543>. One out of approximately 10,000 eggs hatch in 10-14 days and feed on phytoplankton and zooplankton in near shore waters for another 10 - 14



days before they become juveniles, staying in inside waters until the fall, when they become fingerlings. By 2-3 years of age, they are ready to join other herring in deeper waters.

Commercial herring fisheries, started in the late 1870's, turned herring into oil and fertilizer. By the early 1900's, fishery managers in BC were concerned about the decline in local herring stocks. In BC, an intensive "reduction" (for oil) fishery led to a collapse of stocks in the late 1960's. In the early 1970's, after some stock recovery, and prompted by the collapse of the herring fishery in Japan, the frenzied "sac-roe fishery" in BC began. The sac-roe fishing continues in BC and many parts of Alaska today, though generally in much reduced numbers as the stocks have dwindled.

Dana Lepofsky has been studying archaeological and oral historical records, which indicate that herring was once a primary food species for First Nations throughout the Pacific Coast, and especially in the Salish Sea. Today, however "Most Tla'amin and other coastal First Nations say that herring runs are too small to make it worthwhile to fish or collect spawn. They attribute this dramatic decline to over-fishing by seine boats in the 1980's, when there were so many boats in Tla'amin territory (just north of Powell River) that "you could easily walk from boat to boat."

This year's herring spawn along several bays on Lasqueti was a first for many of us. Let us hope that a limited fishery, the amazing capacity of nature, and a sea free of oil and coal ships will allow this herring spawn event to be seen every year!

(For more information from herring knowledge holders up and down the coast: <http://www.pacificherring.org>)

**Lasqueti Island Nature Conservancy and
the Islands Trust Fund
are pleased to host**

Picnic in the Park

July 19th, at Squitty Bay

we'll provide refreshments and treats

you bring your own picnic lunch

**from noon to around 4pm, join us for
local guided walks:**

- *the park's unique features,**
- *salmon enhancement projects,**
- *beach fun for kids, and more**

**A Celebration of Conservation
on Lasqueti and surrounding islands!**