

TRANSCRIPT

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INTERVIEWER: David Todd

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David Todd [00:00:01] Okay. Good morning. I'm David Todd, and I have the great privilege of being here with Laura Joseph. And with her permission, we plan on recording this interview for research and educational work on behalf of a non-profit group called the Conservation History Association of Texas, and for a book and a website for Texas A&M University Press, and finally, for an archive at the Briscoe Center for American History, which is located here in Austin at the University of Texas.

David Todd [00:00:34] And I always want to just emphasize that those are our plans, but she has all rights to use the recording as she sees fit because it is her recording as well.

David Todd [00:00:46] So, I want to make sure that that's a good plan that fits well with you.

Laura Joseph [00:00:51] Yes.

David Todd [00:00:52] Great. Okay. Well, let's, let's get started.

David Todd [00:00:55] It is Thursday, December 8th of 2022, about 10:20 a.m. Central Time. As I said, my name is David Todd and I am representing the Conservation History Association of Texas. And I'm in Austin.

Laura Joseph [00:01:13] And we are fortunate to be conducting an interview with Laura Joseph, who lives in Austin. In fact, we're at her home on Virginia Avenue, and Mrs. Joseph is known as the purple martin lady of Virginia Avenue. She's hosted a large colony of purple martins in South Austin for over a quarter century, with a rotating community of dedicated volunteers who clean and maintain numerous nest boxes, protect against starlings and other predators, monitor the martins, feed them, keep them cool, sometimes go on outings to see the big pre-migratory roosts in the area and a variety of other purple martin tasks.

Laura Joseph [00:02:00] So, today we'll talk about Mrs. Joseph's life and career to date, and especially focus on her work with purple martins.

Laura Joseph [00:02:10] So, that a little, brief introduction to Ms. Joseph and I want to thank her right now just for participating in the project.

Laura Joseph [00:02:19] You are welcome. Well, you are welcome.

David Todd [00:02:22] Thank you so much.

David Todd [00:02:24] So, let's start with your early years. Maybe you could tell us about your childhood, and if there were some people or events in your life then that spurred your interest in animals, birds or purple martins in particular.

Laura Joseph [00:02:41] I grew up in Upshur County, Texas. My hometown is Big Sandy, a small, little village right on, smack dab in the middle of Highway 80 between Dallas and Shreveport in the Piney Woods.

Laura Joseph [00:03:04] And, I grew up there in the forties and fifties when life sort of centered around agriculture, farming, raising cows. Everybody had a wonderful garden. Almost everybody I knew had a martin house.

Laura Joseph [00:03:29] My uncle, whose name was Calvin Earl Kay, was quite a respected gentleman in the county. And he in his, when he wasn't working, I can't think of, when he wasn't working, he was building martin houses. And he went and put them up everywhere because, number one, that was something we all did. And it significantly improved our summers outside. And, it helped the farmers by having them forage, the birds forage on their crops and get rid of harmful insects.

Laura Joseph [00:04:31] So everybody had a martin house. It was a wonderful part of life.

Laura Joseph [00:04:38] And, I had up-close and personal information about what to do from him. Later on, I went to school. I went, some of my early years, to the school in Big Sandy, but as I got older I went to the Consolidated High School, Consolidated Public School, in Glade Water. And on the grounds of the Broadway Elementary School, which was a large plantation-looking building that had two martin houses in front.

Laura Joseph [00:05:28] And, I was, that was the only identifying factor that I had with home. I knew about martins and martins were at the school. So, and getting to have anything to do with the martins was very much a privilege of those who did well in school. So, if you made a hundred on your spelling test, you might be the lucky one who got to clean out the house that day.

Laura Joseph [00:06:05] So, it was a great motivator to me. And before I knew it, I was a committed purple martin advocate at the age of eight or nine.

David Todd [00:06:27] Was there a teacher at your school who would show you how to work?

Laura Joseph [00:06:32] Every teacher did. This was a group effort. Every teacher. And it, it rotated among the classes, and one day was the fifth-grade day. Another day was the fourth-grade day. So I learned this rotation. I learned that martins require a lot of care, and I learned how to do it.

Laura Joseph [00:07:05] So, that, to me, was one of the best lessons of my public school life, because even after I was no longer in that school, none of the other schools in our consolidated district had martin houses. But, the town martin houses were at Broadway Elementary. And everybody, you know, everybody came to see the eggs. They came to see the babies. They came to see them as they were preparing to leave. And we learned about their life cycle. And it was one of the most important lessons of my life.

Laura Joseph [00:07:56] Then, fast forward, I graduated from school in Glade Water at the Consolidated High School of Glade Water. And I came to Austin and I went to college. And after I was in college, I ultimately married a man from Austin and stayed here ever since.

Laura Joseph [00:08:22] And only when I moved over to this house did I have an open space that would accommodate martins. Everywhere I lived in Austin, I put up a martin house. But usually there was a tree nearby. Or there was a building nearby or there was not the open flight path that they, that they seek.

Laura Joseph [00:08:58] So, even when I married and came here, I put, I tried two or three places. And still, the trees are too large or the proximity is too close, although this apparently is a martin paradise because we happen to own that lot next door. And it was always my husband's safety net that he was going to sell it and develop it. But, I found that there was an open flight path there and I put a martin house in the center of the lot and within a week, they were there.

Laura Joseph [00:09:57] And so, I immediately put up another house. And then from that point on, whenever he got an offer to buy the lot, I would just put up another house. So, I've had as many as 30 houses at the, at the lot, which we affectionately call, "the bird lot".

Laura Joseph [00:10:33] I've also tried, because I've read that martins, in a big colony, and I always aspired for a big colony, want many different kinds of housing. They want gourds. They want Troyer gourds. They want the traditional gourd. They want metal housing. They like the Alamo; it's the preferred house for martins. So I have four of them. And, it, as long as there's a variety, because when a martin was born in a gourd, he will try to nest in a gourd. And if he was born in a house, he'll try to find an apartment very much like the one he grew up in.

David Todd [00:11:37] It would, I think, help, for those of us who are not martin experts by any stretch, to help us understand the differences between like a traditional, a gourd, an Alamo, a metal house. Can you describe what these look like.

Laura Joseph [00:11:56] Well, I just set upon finding every kind of house that's available. Because I want variety. And it's really fun to watch them when they're coming home. They will search out every alternative. And a few of them go into a gourd and I swear they've been there three times before. They just seem to know exactly where they want to be. But others flit around and go in and out and devote sometimes as much as two or three days, just selecting the house that they want. So, it's important to have every kind.

Laura Joseph [00:12:50] So, when I see something available, I try to. And it's different, like almost every gourd I have now has been retrofitted to a Troyer entrance. And that, well, first, I retrofitted all of them to a starling-resistant, a half-moon opening. So, I converted the round opening to a half-moon, and that is the best thing a martin conservationist can do because it keeps out starlings. So that was the first widespread adaptation I made to the colony.

Laura Joseph [00:13:49] Then, I began to really actively search out different types, from the Alamo houses, from the Lone Star houses. I have, I have intentionally tried to have at least one of every kind.

David Todd [00:14:15] And so, an Alamo house, is it, is it one of the ones that shaped sort of appear like gourd? Or is it a rectangular?

Laura Joseph [00:14:24] It's a boxy, modernistic house that consists of four panels, four lingular panels, that are divided into four apartments on each side. So, I believe, the Alamo

house has 24 apartments. And, it's really great because I love that particular house and I have more of those than any other houses in the colony because martins like it the best.

Laura Joseph [00:15:08] And, it also is the easiest to take care of because you open one door and you have access to four houses. The house also comes equipped with a nest tray, which you can pull out just like you would a drawer in a cabinet. And it's, so it's easy to clean. It's easy to check on the babies when they're in there. You can just pull the tray out, look at them.

Laura Joseph [00:15:44] Now, it gets to be tricky near the end of the life cycle, of their growing period, because they can jump off. And you want to keep them in the nest as long as, as you can. So we have some strategies that we use to keep them in the nest, but it's the nest tray makes it exceedingly easy to care for.

David Todd [00:16:14] You know would be helpful is, is to sort of reel back a little bit and it help us understand why it is that people like you need to build artificial nest houses. You know, many birds make their own nests, find our own nest, use other bird's nests. But this is very unusual that people want to get involved.

Laura Joseph [00:16:41] It is very unusual and it evolved. It's an evolutionary thing that one can't help but highly appreciate, because martins were just like any other bird. They made their own nest. They nested in hollowed trees or cactus, the big, big cactus, saguaros in New Mexico, under bridges, you know. They had their own nest.

Laura Joseph [00:17:34] But, native Americans discovered that martins were wonderful to have around. So, and they used gourds a lot. So, they were constantly, native Americans, were constantly growing gourds, drying gourds, hollowing them out, using them for dishes, using them for storage, using them for packaging.

Laura Joseph [00:18:16] And so, in this drying out process, they would hang out numbers of gourds. And the martins were attracted to them. So, all of a sudden, the gourds that were drying were home for martins.

Laura Joseph [00:18:39] And Indian villages had their own security system, because when visitors would come up to the village, either with good intent or not, the martins would fly out of the gourds and let everybody know that they had company.

Laura Joseph [00:19:09] So, very quickly every Indian tribe had a series of gourds hanging and a martin colony. And that's how it started.

David Todd [00:19:23] That's interesting - sort of like sentries, to announce people arriving. OK.

Laura Joseph [00:19:31] You know, they help the Indians in many ways. They not only wear the sentries and the door bells for them, but they ate a lot of harmful insects.

Laura Joseph [00:19:47] And, it is absolutely impossible to be unhappy in the presence of a purple martin, the most cheerful bird on earth, who is so active, so engaged in the world that I'm positive the Indians were just as taken with them as we are today.

Laura Joseph [00:20:17] So, it became a widespread part of life to care for the birds. And I think it got started right there.

Laura Joseph [00:20:35] And, and, you know, at the same time, there were fewer dead limbs that hadn't been used for firewood. There were fewer places for martins to nest. And so over the millennia, they just switched to the gourds and manmade housing.

David Todd [00:21:10] Well, and is there a trend with martins that appears to you to sort of argue for, for trying to protect the martins and restore them through building these, erecting all these nest boxes? Is that something that drives you as well?

Laura Joseph [00:21:31] Oh, definitely, because I was always interested to replicate that experience from my childhood.

Laura Joseph [00:21:41] But, I lived along Shoal Creek for most of the years that I didn't live here. And the trees in North Austin are so expansive that you can hardly find a place. So I had martin houses several times over the years, but I never had any martins.

Laura Joseph [00:22:07] Then, when I moved here, I had a martin house out front, but it was very close to a pecan tree. And I never, I never attracted any martins. And so, I said to my husband one time, "I think I'm going to have to try the lot." And I said, "I don't think we can get any martin houses." Because he had given me a martin house for a, a wedding gift, as a matter of fact.

Laura Joseph [00:22:45] And so, we put it up right in the center of the bird lot. And there were martins within a week. And then I read about gourds and the artificial, I never did try to raise gourds so that I could clean them out, because they're, they're very hard to get into. I've tried it. You know, you have to cut a hole in them and clean them out, dry them and all of that. And then they're a one term, one season. So I never was really attracted to that possibility.

Laura Joseph [00:23:35] But, I discovered the fiberglass ones and put the first one up over there about 30 years ago and within a couple of days, it was filled with, it was filled with birds.

Laura Joseph [00:23:58] So, it's the water from Lady Bird Lake. It's the electrical wires that they love to perch on.

Laura Joseph [00:24:08] It's the proximity to people, because I have also tried to have a martin house at our ranch and they're not interested, even though it's got a wonderful flight path. They don't want to be where there are no people. That seems to be high on their list. There have to be people nearby. So they're not attracted to country places without people.

David Todd [00:24:47] That's so interesting. So there's some sort of communal feeling on both the martins and the people.

Laura Joseph [00:24:55] Yes there is.

David Todd [00:24:56] Their end as well.

David Todd [00:24:59] Well, so one thing that would be, I think, helpful to us, you know, it sounds like there's just this delight in sort of companionship with the birds, and it's useful, you know, they eat the bugs and they act as sentries, but I understand that there's also sort of a conservation argument to be made for trying to promote the birds. The birds have some challenges.

Laura Joseph [00:25:27] Definitely.

David Todd [00:25:27] Is that right?

Laura Joseph [00:25:28] Yes, definitely. And it's kind of come full circle again, because 30 years ago when I started, there was a great deal in the literature about saving martins. They were definitely on the decline. They were, if not on the endangered species, they were going. They were reported that they're going to be on the species. The numbers were down so much that our rallying call was to save the birds. You know, we were doing something that was noble because the birds were dying out.

Laura Joseph [00:26:27] So, the first two or three years we had maybe 50 birds. I mean, the first year we had something like eight, and then maybe 35, and then 50. So, it took many years, probably ten years, for us to get to the point where we had 400 fledglings. It was definitely a slow process, but we were determined because we had this space. We seemed to know what to do to attract them and to keep them. And we had a dedicated work force that was willing to experiment with all kinds of new things.

Laura Joseph [00:27:38] There was one gentleman in particular I always have to talk about - Gardner Sumner, because he was a physician. And, you, you read in all the literature that martins won't eat out of your hands. They won't eat out of a, a bird feeder. They only eat on the fly. So you've got to throw whatever it is that you're trying to feed them in the air and they have to be watching for it.

Laura Joseph [00:28:21] Well, Gardner just completely dispelled that idea, because he learned to feed them, to hand-feed them. And it was a great joy for him to open that door and all of those mouths opened at once because he learned to force feed them and, you know, abide initially putting tidbits in their mouths.

Laura Joseph [00:28:52] But, and then he, he taught us all kinds of things. He, he taught us to use in times of really, really hot weather, he taught us to use syringes, filled with water and to, uh, train the birds so that when they, you open the door, they open their mouths, and you give them a drop of water that's life-sustaining.

Laura Joseph [00:29:31] So, we have probably 15 martin landlords who are comfortable with doing just that. So we, we save, I don't know if I could say hundreds, but lots and lots of birds that might not make it by our rather extreme feeding and watering techniques.

David Todd [00:30:10] Well, so, it sounds like there are lots of challenges for any bird, and maybe for the martins in particular. I mean, it sounds like, you know, extreme weather, drought, heat, maybe the decline of trees where they can naturally nest. Are those are some of the factors that you see in the decline of the bird that you're trying to address?

Laura Joseph [00:30:34] Yes, they are. But they all, all of those things, seem to pale in regard to climate change. It has gotten, in the last five years, it has become so difficult because the heat is just unbelievably devastating to the babies.

Laura Joseph [00:31:12] So, we've again, we're just experimenting and we're trying things, like cardboard roofs and frozen water bottles. We, we have, I have a freezer outside that becomes dedicated to frozen water bottles. And we freeze them all the time. In morning and

evening, we put them in the martin houses and near the gourds to see if we can't raise the, I mean, lower the temperature. It seems to work.

Laura Joseph [00:32:02] But, this last summer, we had nine days of triple-digit heat. One right after the other. We, we lost a lot of birds. The parents are just so lethargic that they can't muster the energy to go out and hunt and the babies just get weaker and weaker and many die.

David Todd [00:32:43] Well, it sounds like there are these pressures during the heat of the summer, I mean just the heat itself, but also the inability of the birds, the mothers and fathers, to go out and hunt.

David Todd [00:32:55] But, do you find that on the flip side, like during some of these extreme cold spells, you know, like Uri, I guess about a year and a half ago, was that a problem for the birds as well?

Laura Joseph [00:33:09] It was a terrible problem. It was really devastating because I've read some, I've read some data that Texas lost a third of its martin population because they were just coming back home when that storm hit and they flew right into it.

Laura Joseph [00:33:34] And, unless, unless somebody was really actively trying to figure out what to do with them, you know, feeding them scrambled eggs. That seems to be a real help, but some of them just resist any kind of help and some die. But a great many of them do live. But it's an expensive, labor-intensive process. The people really have to buy in.

David Todd [00:34:26] Due to climate shifts, but can you tell me a little bit about the time that they arrive, and the time that they're here, and then the time that they depart?

Laura Joseph [00:34:37] Sure. They, they arrive, in the last four or five years, as long as I've been cognizant of it, they have, there have been some martins here by Valentine's, February 14th. So that's kind of our marker. And we began looking, I began looking, on the computer around the 1st of February. And I should be seeing that martins are in Brownsville, or martins are in Edinburg, or martins are seen in San Antonio, because I can follow that.

Laura Joseph [00:35:32] And then along about, I spend most of my day on Valentine's Day looking at the sky and listening, because I can hear them. And I have a neighbor across the street, Celia Johnson, who watches with me. And she, if she hears a sound, she calls me. If I hear it, I call her. And for the last three or four years, there have been one or two have made it on Valentine's.

Laura Joseph [00:36:06] And then, that's just the starting point. The next day there might be three, next day five, you know, just more and more come, but some make it on Valentine's. So that's kind of our, our starting point.

Laura Joseph [00:36:29] And then, they're here, and we always gather out on the bird lot for the July 4th fireworks. You can see the fireworks nicely from the bird lot. And the birds are gone. So, somewhere close to February 15th, the majority come. Somewhere close to July 4th, the majority have left.

Laura Joseph [00:37:10] And there were a few - three or four nests - where the parents were still feeding them into August this past year. But it was so hot. And I believe I can say that there were only two birds in the nest that actually fledged. The rest of them died.

Laura Joseph [00:37:39] Regardless of our hot water, I mean, our refrigeration in the nest above, and the nests below our artificial roofs. And I mean, I've even taken to running the sprinkler, trying to get humidity in the air.

David Todd [00:38:08] It sounds like, over the years, you all have put a lot of effort into monitoring these birds...

Laura Joseph [00:38:15] Yes.

David Todd [00:38:15] And certainly tracking when they arrive and when they leave. But it sounds like there's more to it. There's banding and so on. Can you talk a little bit about that.

Laura Joseph [00:38:22] No, we don't do any banding.

David Todd [00:38:24] No banding.

Laura Joseph [00:38:24] No banding. I'm opposed to that, because I think life is hard on a purple martin, and one with a band on its leg is, in my limited view, having a harder time. I don't ... I mean, on the one hand, I support gathering information from a computer chip that is stuck on its wing. But I also think that's a hardship that a martin ought not have to bear trying to get across the ocean, to have an apparatus stuck on its wing. So, we don't do any of that.

David Todd [00:39:12] Okay.

Laura Joseph [00:39:13] Luckily, no one has ever asked us to, so we don't do that. But, it's, we try to make them as well equipped. I wish, I wish we could prepare them to go to Elgin and back. Instead, they take off for a 3000-mile journey and they're very ill-equipped.

David Todd [00:39:47] Well, so I understand your point about the banding. But, do you, do you keep track of like how many birds are in each nest box? How many fledge? How many survive?

Laura Joseph [00:40:04] Yes.

David Todd [00:40:05] How do you do that?

Laura Joseph [00:40:09] I can run and get a book for you. We have a notebook and we have a garbage can that sits out on the bird lot. And in the garbage can are gloves, alcohol, Band-Aids, I don't know, charts. We have a lot of charts that show this is a martin at age six weeks. This is a martin at eight weeks. This is a fully-fledged martin.

Laura Joseph [00:40:52] We have pictures, charts, of the martin nest and the sparrow nest. We keep a sparrow nest wrapped in plastic, so we want everybody to know the difference. And so we keep them front and center.

Laura Joseph [00:41:20] And, in this trash can, which we call the command central, is a book, a journal book. And there's a picture. We try to take pictures of every day, so that, here's a

Monday, for example. That's my day. So, we take a picture of all our team, and we post it in the book. And then we write exactly what we do. We noticed there was and every pole has a letter. It's "A" through, "A" through "O", are poles.

Laura Joseph [00:42:12] And then, every house is numbered. Not only is the house, which the tray number, this is a nest tray that we pull out. But when the door is closed ... Let me see if I can. They're numbered.

David Todd [00:42:50] Okay. And so, you're showing me this wonderful calendar that you've put together of lots of photographs...

Laura Joseph [00:42:55] Yes.

David Todd [00:42:55] Of the people and the gear and the birds, of course.

Laura Joseph [00:42:59] So, when we notice something unusual in let's just say this is in "M-15", we write it down in the book, so that those who come tomorrow, the first thing they do is look at the book and look to see if everything is okay in M-15. You can see we've got, we have numbers on them. Everything is lettered and numbered.

David Todd [00:43:43] And what sort of information are you trying to glean from the reports on one day and then following the next day, what sort of things you're trying to understand?

Laura Joseph [00:43:53] We're trying to keep a running record of what kind of help is needed in M-15. If there was a martin who got its wing stuck, we would un-stick him. And then we would make a note of that. And then the group tomorrow would know to make sure that that wasn't an injured bird, you know, that he was flying around. Or, even more important, that there were five eggs in that nest and one had hatched. So there should be two hatched, because they had one-a-day hatches. So there should be a second one today.

Laura Joseph [00:44:53] So, that's just our, that's the first thing you do is look at the book and I can show one to you. We keep a book, a journal, and it gets to be pretty thick because that's, every team writes in the book. And it may be, it may be something as sketchy as, "Everything looked great today".

David Todd [00:45:19] Well, you know, you've been keeping these journals for decades now, I gather. Are there some trends that you're seeing? You know, are there more or fewer adults? Are there more or fewer eggs or fledglings?

Laura Joseph [00:45:35] Well, for a long, long time - 25 years - our numbers were going up, going up, going up. And we've had as many as, I think, maybe our all-time high is 520 fledglings. This year, our number was 168. So we're still trying to get over the freeze of two years ago, and we bounded back somewhat, but nowhere near back to where we were.

Laura Joseph [00:46:22] So, martins were severely disrupted by the, the long freeze of two years ago and then the freeze that we had last year, it just so happened the majority of the martins in Texas just flew right into it. And they're weak, and they're tired. They're hungry, and they get home, and the weather is horrible. And you try some things to feed them, but they have to want to be fed. And, you know, we've tried crickets, mealworms on platforms, mealworms in their houses, throwing mealworms up in the air. It's, it's very difficult to get

them to eat something that's not flying of its own accord. I wish we still had Gardner because he could figure out. We're not all as gifted as he, in figuring out how to feed them.

David Todd [00:47:50] Well, you know, I'm curious about Gardner, and, and his ability to teach the birds to take food from a human. And I'm wondering if the birds that were taught that, taught that in turn to their babies, or if it has to be re-taught with every generation?

Laura Joseph [00:48:10] Well, I suspect that has to be re-taught. I don't think that a one-time experience makes it internal. I think it would have to be built up. And so far, we've not been able. I certainly don't have the skills. I mean, he had the tiniest little tools. He had a medical kit that looked like it was designed for birds. It wasn't. But he had little tools that were so perfect for feeding and opening mouths.

David Todd [00:49:03] You know, you told me a little bit about some of the efforts that you've made to keep them cool with these, these frozen water bottles, with the cardboard roofs, or feeding them supplementally.

David Todd [00:49:19] And, I think when we were talking earlier, you mentioned the efforts to protect these birds from predators. And I was wondering if you would talk a little bit about that, because I imagine that's a big part of your work.

Laura Joseph [00:49:32] It is. That's a big part. And last year was a really great year because we did not have any snake infestations. And the year before we did. And one of our poles was wiped out completely because a snake (all of the poles have snake guards, and that's supposed to keep out a snake), but snakes can easily out-smart the guard, and they can jump higher than the guard. They can. And sometimes you're, you see, the guard sits under the winch. And if the winch is very low, then the snake guard is low.

Laura Joseph [00:50:37] And, we've adapted that, pretty adapted to that, pretty successfully, because one of our landlords created a net tutu that goes around the pole. She just gathered together - she's a seamstress - and she just gathered together some netting and it catches the snake. We've caught several that way. They get tangled up in the netting. And they can't, they get over the pole guard, but they get caught up in the netting.

Laura Joseph [00:51:17] But, sometimes they get into the house. And, for example, if we, we do our and the martin work happens at different times during the day. So, like on Monday, we gather at 5:00. So, and Sunday's group gathers on Sunday morning. So they take care of the martins and then they ... nothing happens Sunday afternoon. Nothing happens Monday, until we all gather at 5:00.

Laura Joseph [00:52:12] So, on this particular day, a snake was in the house, was on a pole, and had moved from apartment to apartment and had eaten every egg in the house. So, one of our guys opened the door and there was this just humongous snake bulging with martin eggs. So, we got him out. We put him in a box. We drove him around all over Austin trying to figure out what to do with him, until we finally drove him past Dripping Springs, and led him out on a country road.

David Todd [00:53:03] Was he a rat snake?

Laura Joseph [00:53:05] Mm hmm. Yes. So, we just, you know, we constantly fight snakes.

Laura Joseph [00:53:14] That's, we don't really have a terrible problem with starlings anymore because of, we've, as I said, we've changed every opening, and they really are too broad-breasted to go through the martin's nest, go through the hole into the martin nest. So we've largely got rid of them.

Laura Joseph [00:53:42] We're very aware of snakes, and that's the only thing left are sparrows. And we just stay after them with a vigilance.

David Todd [00:53:54] What do you do about sparrows?

Laura Joseph [00:53:55] We take them out. We don't kill them, we don't trap them. We just take down the houses every day. That's why we have a Monday group, Tuesday group, Wednesday group. And we take out all of the sparrow nests, put them in a bag and compost them. And we destroy ... the kids love to destroy the eggs. So we, there's always some kids out there who have a contest with the sparrow eggs. And we smash them.

David Todd [00:54:36] Something else you mentioned in passing, you said that sometimes one of your volunteers will go to an apartment and they'll find that a martin's wing may be stuck in some awkward position. And I was curious if part of your work here is, is sort of rehabilitating birds that get injured. Is that so?

Laura Joseph [00:54:59] We try to. But if a bird is actually injured, you know, the wing is broken or weak, and we can assess that, we take it to the, over off MLK there is a, doesn't happen very often, but we have taken two or three birds over 30 years over to the refuge where they...

David Todd [00:55:41] You know something that I think is just so neat and wonderful is that you have this enthusiasm and interest, but somehow it's been infectious and it's spread. And you've got this community of people that, as volunteers, just out of altruism, they come over and...

Laura Joseph [00:56:00] They really, really do.

David Todd [00:56:03] Well, tell me about how you attracted these stewards.

Laura Joseph [00:56:07] I started, I started by having a neighborhood celebration when they arrived. And that, by that I mean, having a party, having a supper, inviting everybody who might possibly be interested and having them sign up. And then I didn't do it during COVID, during those three years, I didn't have any, any kind of social gathering, and people still signed up. So we have quite a network of people now, just like Charlotte.

Laura Joseph [00:57:11] And, it's evolved now that there is a leader for every day. Charlotte is Tuesday. I'm Monday. Angie's Wednesday. Steve is Thursday. Friday is Donna. Saturday is Andrew and Sunday is Kate. So, we have a sort of a ring leader, a team leader. And they, if, if somebody on the Saturday team can't come, then they call Andrew, and he either calls me or someone else he knows so that it's not too much work for anybody.

Laura Joseph [00:58:15] And, we talk about it being 30 minutes. There's 30 minutes of activity. So your time commitment is 30 minutes per week. And people really respond to that. You know, it's not that's not much.

Laura Joseph [00:58:37] And yet, they all meet that. Mostly, I'll take, I'll just take Charlotte, Charlotte's group meets on Wednesday, and one of them brings the wine, and another brings the snack. And then they do all the things that they need to do. They write in the book, they give directions for the Thursday group, something to look for. They sit and talk. They let the sun go down. They enjoy each other's company, and they're done. And every group sort of works like that.

David Todd [00:59:26] Well, so what is it that motivates them?

Laura Joseph [00:59:30] Yeah, well, there's a lot of do-goodness in all of us, and there are very tangible benefits that you can see. You know, you can, you can ... it's a wonderful thing to see a, a nest like this that turns to this. And that, you know, we also encourage people to bring along people in their neighborhood so that they can follow a nest from the minute that the parents put these leaves in. Because when these leaves start being put on the top of the nest, that means they're getting ready to lay eggs. And so that ... here's one. This is the first one. They just lay one egg a day.

Laura Joseph [01:00:32] So, there's some real science that kids can learn. And we, we try to involve as many kids as possible.

David Todd [01:00:50] Could you give me some examples of some of the scientific lessons that you think you can pass on to a child?

Laura Joseph [01:00:57] Well, of course, we teach them about calcium in egg shells, and we encourage them to save their egg shells, and microwave them, and crush them up, and then put them on their feeders. We have four or five feeders out there where we keep egg shells. And then, the parents eat the egg shells, which is like taking a calcium tablet every day. And also, the parents feed the crushed egg shells to the babies because that helps them digest dragonflies, and beetles, and whatever else the parents bring home for them to eat. They need some kind of grit to help them chew it up. And so we teach them that the egg shells are a really important part of the martin's life.

Laura Joseph [01:02:15] And, if you eat an egg, you need to save the shell and bring it. And lots of kids do. Lots of kids do. We have two or three inches of egg shells all the time out there.

Laura Joseph [01:02:44] We also try to make sure that kids can identify the various stages of a martin's life. So looking at this particular guy, you can tell that he's an adult martin. And so, we have some sort of flashcards that we use in teaching children how. Now, this is a baby and we have a chart that will ... they're life-size. And you can see about how big he is, and as opposed to this guy.

David Todd [01:03:32] So, you have some sort of a template, or a guide, that the kids can look at and compare the living bird with the picture.

Laura Joseph [01:03:39] Yes. And to see about how, well, he's this big. So how old is he?

Laura Joseph [01:03:44] It's also really, really important. We spend a lot of time in teaching people about the ages of the birds, because just imagine that these people right here - they get there, and there is a bird on the ground. And you don't know. You can see that he can't fly. But, you don't know whether he's two weeks old or he's three weeks old.

Laura Joseph [01:04:30] So, we have this book and we have a record. I'm going to go get one and show you. We have a record of how many birds are in each house, so M-13 has five babies in it. Well, the easiest thing - it doesn't always work out like that - but the easiest thing would be to look in M-13 and see there are only four. So, most likely, the one on the ground came from that.

Laura Joseph [01:05:08] But, maybe not. Maybe he just hopped near that. Maybe he came from another pole, and he just hopped near this pole.

Laura Joseph [01:05:18] So, what we have to do is look at our charts and see about how old he is, and estimate how old the babies are in the nest, because if he's bigger than they are, they'll starve to death and he'll eat all the food. If he's smaller than they are, he'll starve to death and they'll get all the food.

Laura Joseph [01:05:46] So, this is an important decision for us to make. He's got to blend in. So, we look carefully to see, is there a nest that has only - one, two, three, four, four - as opposed to six? And maybe he's this size. So we put him here, and the martins raise him. They feed him. It doesn't matter that he wasn't with them all along. If he's the same size, the martins will care for him.

Laura Joseph [01:06:28] So, that's the second half when all the babies are born. Like this guy. He just may think he can fly, but he can't. And he gets out on the front and he jumps out. If we don't catch him and get him back into the nest pretty soon, if he stays on the ground, one, ants will cover him and that will be the end of him. God forbid a cat will get him.

Laura Joseph [01:07:09] So, our job is to be vigilant. And so, we're, we have runs now near the end of the, after all the birds are born, we have to, we go into the jumper mode, and we patrol the bird lot every couple of hours.

David Todd [01:07:36] This is so interesting and I just really admire your care and diligence.

David Todd [01:07:43] Something I wanted to ask, and I see we have about 10 minutes before you need to run, so I don't want to take too much of your time.

David Todd [01:07:51] But, the two things I wanted to ask you, one is about the purple martin parties at the pre-migration roosts, which are such a phenomenon.

Laura Joseph [01:08:05] Yes.

David Todd [01:08:05] And, I know I've seen you at some of those. And then secondly, just if you have any sort of overarching lessons that you've taken from your life with martins. So those are my two questions. And of course, if there's anything you wanted to add in this limited amount of time we've got left, let's, let's do that.

Laura Joseph [01:08:28] First, what I've, what I've learned is that people are inherently good and there are very, very few people who are not moved to care for creatures - birds, snakes. You know, most people are very willing to do that. And their nature makes them, it's highly motivating to them. So it's really exciting for me to see that people will, when I send out a flash bulletin, "baby was down", it's, it's real exciting to me that eight or ten people show up.

Laura Joseph [01:09:54] It's also exciting to me for people to see how rare it is in the world we live in now to have this kind of an intimate relationship with birds. Most people come into this with the idea that martins are like cardinals. If you touch their baby, you know, they'll abandon them, and that's, that's the end. Martins really want to be touched. And they, I've even experienced placing sparrow babies in their nest and having them raise them. I didn't know they were sparrows. Years ago, I dumped out a nest into the flower bed and realized there were two babies in the nest. And I thought, "Oh, my gosh, they're martins". And so I put them back in a nest, but they were sparrows, and yet they were lovingly embraced by martins. So, that's, I think, an inherently good thing.

Laura Joseph [01:11:28] And, I've been anxious to see these three boys. I'm so glad their picture is here. This is the dad. And these are the two boys, and this is the mother. And they've been coming, well, these two boys were in strollers when the parents started coming. And last summer we had the, we hosted the Audubon Society. We had about 200 who came. We were nervous about it, but we all decided, well, it's going to be outside. It's going to be in the open. There's, you know, we're not going to be closed. It's going to be okay. And this little boy did the talk from our group. And he's 14. And he fielded the questions. He, later on, the different ones chimed in. But he was the speaker for our group. And he had prepared a wonderful talk for the Audubon Society about what we do and why we do it.

Laura Joseph [01:12:57] And, it was just one of the best things that I've ever experienced, because this boy is like me. He became a conservationist. He became a birder. He became concerned about nature through exposure, through direct contact, direct involvement. And that's, that's how it happens the best. Not, not, not that just reading about it isn't important, but hands-on experience is the best way.

David Todd [01:13:54] Well, that's very eloquent. Well, I don't want to overstay my welcome.

Laura Joseph [01:14:02] I want to go get the book and show you.

David Todd [01:14:04] Okay. Is there anything that you might want to say about the purple martin parties that you sometimes go to?

Laura Joseph [01:14:11] Well, one, I always try to organize the neighborhood to go because it's just one more step in the evolution of the martins. And we had, we had about 35 to go this year. And I love for them to see it and to be overcome with the joy of what it is. This is a picture of the Capital Plaza roost that we took.

Laura Joseph [01:14:56] So, I think, I wish the, I kind of wish the Audubon Society would do more because what they call a purple martin party is just really paying your dues and joining the Audubon Society. I recognize the need for that, but I'd like to see them teach. This is a marvelous opportunity to get a captive audience who is very enthusiastic about what they see. That's a much better teachable moment. And just putting a table out and giving people an opportunity to join, you know, there could be more made of that.

David Todd [01:15:56] Well, that makes me think of a last question, and then we can let you go back to what you were previously doing and need to do afterwards.

David Todd [01:16:07] What has purple martin, the world of purple martins, from these eggs to fledglings to adults, taught you? Is there any sort of message that you've taken away from them?

Laura Joseph [01:16:20] Oh, definitely. It's, what it has taught me, first of all, is reverence and gratitude and a fierce commitment to share. I really am blessed to be living here, and I think I'm obligated to share what I know, and what resources I have. So I try to do that.

Laura Joseph [01:17:14] Last year, I bought a calendar for everybody in the neighborhood and I tried to, and I thought that this this contest would be, they're, you know, everybody's taking pictures now. And I thought this would be another way to try to cement this in our neighborhood, because it is an opportunity.

Laura Joseph [01:17:46] I, I have spent more than 30 years trying to involve the people who live on the corner, who have the greatest benefit, because they're the closest and they're just not interested.

Laura Joseph [01:18:06] But, I'm still trying.

David Todd [01:18:15] Well, don't give up.

Laura Joseph [01:18:16] I'm not. I just. And I have won over everybody on this street.

David Todd [01:18:26] Well, you're very winning, and you're very generous and patient. Thank you so much for your time today.