

2016 John Thalheimer Volunteer of the Year Award

As presented by Pamela Hunt at the New Hampshire Audubon Annual Meeting, September 17, 2016.

The John Thalheimer Volunteer of the Year Award has been presented annually since 1997. This award is dedicated to the first recipient, John Thalheimer, whose outstanding service to New Hampshire Audubon exemplified volunteer commitment, strengthened the organization, and provided an inspiring example for others. The 2016 award is presented to Dennis Skillman and Warren Trested.

Dennis and Warren have formed a team in two significant NH Audubon projects, the New Hampshire Dragonfly Survey and the Purple Martin Conservation Project. It all started with a photograph. Dennis Skillman took a picture of a dragonfly called the Comet Darner at a Brentwood wetland in 2007, and posted the image to his Flickr page. Sometime afterward, NH Audubon Biologist Pam Hunt happened upon the image and immediately contacted Dennis – this was the first record of a Comet Darner for New Hampshire! Suitably astounded by this unexpected fame, Dennis quickly became enamored of dragonflies, and started volunteering for NH Audubon in 2008, the second year of the New Hampshire Dragonfly Survey (NHDS). It wasn't long before Dennis had roped his longtime friend and colleague Warren Trested into this endeavor, and over the next four years the pair contributed significantly to our knowledge of dragonfly and damselfly distributions in the interior towns of southern Rockingham County.

Among their contributions was the discovery of a new site for the state-endangered Ringed Boghaunter. They also elevated several towns to the much-sought-after “50 species” threshold. On May 7, 2010, in a field in Kingston, we had the pleasure of finding and photographing a Hessel's Hairstreak, a rare butterfly not reported in the state since the 1980s.

Dennis amassed a *minimum* of 355 volunteer hours and 1,364 miles during the NHDS. For this he was one of multiple co-recipients of the NH Audubon “President's Award” in 2012 and a volunteer award from the NH Nongame and Endangered Species Program in 2013. Dennis's volunteer hours for the NHDS ranks him fifth of all the participants in that project. Warren's contribution in this regard is harder to measure, since in some cases an accurate accounting was not kept, but his hours certainly topped 100, placing him 15th of almost 100 participants-

Both Dennis and Warren continued seeking dragonflies in their local towns even after the NHDS ended in 2012. In 2014, Dennis volunteered to conduct marsh bird surveys at the Pine Hill Road Wildlife Management Area in Brentwood. But his interest changed after birders discovered a pair of Purple Martins in Seabrook in 2013.



Dennis Skillman and Warren Trested receiving the 2016 John Thalheimer Volunteer of the Year Award from Pam Hunt.

Photo by Dyanna Smith.

At the time, this site only had one pair of martins, and was one of only three colonies for this species in the state. Dennis expressed interest in doing something to help the colony, and perhaps increase its size. So in the early spring of 2014, he and Warren recruited a small crew of additional volunteers, and began to plan the installation of additional martin housing at the site. NH Audubon provided funds for the new housing, which consisted of a dozen plastic gourds and a mounting pole.

The site in question is a salt marsh, and subject to fluctuating tides and shifting ice during the winter. Dennis and Warren were concerned that this harsh environment might make a simple installation of the pole problematic. They put their engineering skills to work and devised a support system that they hoped would both keep the gourds vertical all summer and be easily removable for the winter. They installed the set-up in April, and then could only sit back and wait to see if martins would take to the gourds. While they waited, they continued to learn more about martins, and prepared to begin monitoring the colony if birds took up residence.

Martins indeed took to the gourds, with five pairs in 2014 and 12 (maxed out!) in 2015, so regular monitoring became critical to ensure nesting success. This is because weekly nest checks allow us to know if House Sparrows are causing problems, and clean nests to reduce potential parasite loads. Dennis took on the role of monitor-in-chief, and Warren helped with organizing the weekly checks around the tides (the site is only accessible at low tide) and recruiting other volunteers to make the weekly task go faster. Each of them missed only a couple of nest checks each season between May and August.

But the success of the martins at this site had a downside: the martins started harassing the numerous Tree Swallows also nesting in the marsh, and this upset some of the local residents who had been placing swallow boxes there for years. Dennis, Warren, and other members of team set out to learn what they could about this new issue, which apparently was not a significant problem at other martin colonies. In 2014 they listened to the locals' concerns and agreed to move the gourds farther out into the marsh in 2015.

When 2015 came around, it turned out the martins were still harassing swallows, a situation not helped by the increased number of martins. During this time, Dennis and Warren made a point of regularly communicating with two of the neighbors, both in person and via email, and expanding their roles from "chief engineer and martin monitor" to "conflict resolution specialist." Among the tasks included in the later job description have been:

- Building and installing "nest guards" to the swallow boxes in an attempt to make them harder for martins to access. They then watched each modified box to make sure the swallows would still enter, and remove the guards if not.
- Building dozens of *new* boxes that will hopefully be harder for martins to access, and giving these to the residents, who painted them and put them up. The Seabrook Martin Team placed boxes in the more inaccessible sections.
- After talking to the locals, they also spearheaded the *removal* of many of the older existing houses, most of which were in extremely poor condition.

All this box modification work was done at their own expense, although other volunteers have helped make boxes, and the team received a donation to help the residents buy new paint.

In an effort to spread the growing Seacoast martin population beyond Seabrook, Dennis, Warren, the other volunteers, and Pam Hunt set about looking for a location for an expansion site. They settled on a town-owned parcel along Island Path in Hampton, roughly a mile north of the existing colony. After NH Audubon secured permission to use the site from the town's Select Board, Dennis and Warren installed

a new gourd rack in late April of 2016. One pair of martins nested at this new colony and fledged three young. At the same time, there were 13 nests at Seabrook, and significantly less harassment of Tree Swallows by the martins. It appears all the effort into new and modified bird houses for the marsh paid off.

Finally, Dennis added “general outreach” to his job description, and gave a presentation on the Seabrook martins to the Seacoast Chapter of NH Audubon in the spring of 2016. This talk resulted in a couple of new volunteers, one of whom was so inspired that he installed a gourd rack of his own on his property in Rye. Everyone was taken by surprise when a pair actually took up residence there in June; and the story ended happily with four young fledging in August. Plans are already underway to expand capacity at all three locations in 2017.

Dennis and Warren exemplify what we hope volunteering for NH Audubon can do for a person and for conservation. It starts innocently enough, with the simple thrill of the chase – and perhaps finding a few new species of dragonflies for East Kingston or Hampstead. But then there’s the innocuous step into a project of your own – let’s build a cool new structure for Purple Martins! Before you know it, you’re organizing a team of volunteers of your own, and in this case end up being nothing less than a “voice” for NH Audubon. The latter can even result in sometimes tricky interpersonal interactions with people who are a little upset about the unintended side effects of all the good work you set out to do in the first place. Through Dennis’s and Warren’s efforts and those of the other volunteers they’ve coached and recruited, the population of Purple Martins along the NH coast has increased from a single pair at one site in 2013 to 15 pairs at three sites in 2016. Dennis and Warren aren’t slowing down as long as there are other places where martins could nest in the area!

Dennis and Warren haven’t been very good about recording their hours during the martin project, but suffice it to say that this has been a labor of love for them (and their recruits), and it’s been my pleasure to watch them go about these diverse tasks and keep everybody happy in the process – especially the Purple Martins!

NH Audubon is fortunate to have Dennis Skillman and Warren Trested and we congratulate them on receiving the 2016 John Thalheimer Volunteer Award.

