

THE JAMESTOWN BIRD ROOST

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For many years I had observed large flocks of blackbirds and starlings flying over my home each evening, without knowing where they went, until I learned, from Claude Parker and Phillip Lenna, of the existence of a large bird roost about two miles distant. In 1956 I first visited the roost, and was astounded to find an estimated 50,000 Purple Martins. Since then I have visited the area frequently, making, for instance, ten visits during August, September and October 1960.

The roost is located only a mile east of the center of Jamestown, bounded by Allen, Buffalo and Benedict Streets, and Pratt Avenue. The block is 44 acres in extent and is largely city owned. The altitude varies from 1297 feet at the Chadokoin River to over 1500 feet at a point near Benedict Street. Overlooking the River, along Allen Street, are cliffs up to 150 feet high, formerly a quarry of the Jamestown brickyard, but the edge of the cliff is too far from the roosting area to be a good vantage point. There are a few houses on Benedict St., and a few on Buffalo, with several business buildings. To the north, and through the valley numerous factories line the Erie Railroad.

The majority of the birds roost in 10 or 15 acres, of Hawthorne (*Crataegus* sp.), interspersed with apple and Crab-apple, averaging about 25 feet in height. The undergrowth is sparse, there being a few Elderberry (*Sambucus* sp.) bushes. This central area is surrounded by a dense growth of Panicked Dogwood (*Cornus racemosa*), Red Osier Dogwood (*Cornus stolonifera*), Southern Arrow-wood (*Viburnum dentatus*), Pin Cherry (*Prunus pensylvanica*), hawthorne and crabapple. Near Buffalo Street there are some Wild Black Cherry (*Prunus serotina*) trees, 30-40 feet in height.

The best place from which to observe the birds coming into the roost is a steep cinder path beginning at the intersection of Allen and Buffalo Streets and ending at Eagle Street Extension.

My interest has been primarily in the Purple Martins, but observations have also been made on other species using the roost, and will be included here. At the height of the Martin concentration — late August, flights may be observed in late afternoon, spread out over Chautauqua Lake, heading toward Jamestown. Before they enter the roost Starlings will have come, in great swirling flocks, milling around for ten or fifteen minutes, then dropping down. The Purple Martins pour into the area, circling overhead from great heights to just over the trees, finally plunging into the branches just before darkness falls. The Starlings are quiet, the Martins noisy while in the air. Grackles, Cowbirds, Redwings and Robins seem to dive into the trees without the preliminary overhead milling, noticed in the Starlings and Martins.

In 1960, my estimates of the numbers of Martins at this roost were as follows:

August	29	100,000	September 14	15,000
August	30	50,000	September 18	5,000
September	2	75,000	September 23	200
September	9	30,000	September 30	1

On October 1, 1960, I visited the roost, to observe the pattern after the Martins had all left. Seven Red-winged Blackbirds were the first to appear, at 6:15 P. M. DST. Starlings began to come in at 6:45, and the number increased to about 25,000 in just a few minutes. Shortly there were perhaps 125,000 circling through the air in two large clouds of precise formation, some high, some low, but each cloud several hundred feet high. Closer birds headed one way, farther birds the other, in a great whirlpool motion, occasionally forming a great funnel, until just before 7:00 when they dropped into the trees. After this more Starlings, along with Cowbirds and Red-winged Blackbirds kept arriving, dropping into the roost immediately without circling. A few more birds, including Robins, came in, until 7:20, when darkness fell. I estimated a total of 150,000 Starlings, 7000 Red-winged Blackbirds, 600 Cowbirds, 100 Rusty Blackbirds, 200 Robins, a few White-throated Sparrows and one Towhee. No Grackles were seen, but one observer could not cover all approaches.

In 1959, the first frost was September 16; in 1960 it was not until October 1, and the Martins left earlier in 1959. Very few Barn Swallows were seen in 1960, in contrast with 1959 when hundreds were present.

While Comparative figures are not available for 1961, because of my inability to visit the roost in September and October, it might be of interest to describe the pattern I found there, when I varied my routine and checked the area six minutes before dawn (6:20 A.M., DST) on Aug 29.

The Martins were already pouring out of the roost, flying in a broad path westward toward Chautauqua Lake, with little circling about in contrast with their evening performance, keeping at an altitude of 100-300 feet. Robins were leaving at the same time, flying lower, and in ten minutes, the first Starlings left. About 6:35, Grackles, Starlings, Cowbirds and Redwings were rising in noisy mixed flocks and heading west, at an altitude of about 75 feet. At 6:40, the rest of the Martins rose into the air and headed west. At 6:50, there was a mass exit of thousands of Starlings, to the west and southwest, which continued over five minutes. At 6:55 the Martins were nearly all gone, a few hundred remaining Redwings headed northwest, and small numbers of Starlings left. By 7 A. M., the roost was deserted.

It is interesting to notice that the Martins, last to descend in the evening, are the first to leave in the morning. Robins are also in this category. Starlings arrive later than Redwings in the evening, and leave before them in the morning. In the case of both Martins and Starlings, the characteristic milling of the evening flight is absent in the morning.

On this visit, I estimated the following numbers of birds involved:

Purple Martins	-	-	-	-	-	75,000
Starlings	-	-	-	-	-	75,000
Redwings	-	-	-	-	-	7,500
Cowbirds	-	-	-	-	-	3,500
Grackles	-	-	-	-	-	3,500

In 1962, observations were made on August 13, September 9, 12, and 21. Although coverage was therefore spotty, it did seem apparent that the Martins were in smaller numbers at this roost. Whether this indicates an actual decrease in the population, or that the birds have gone to other roosts, is not known. There were approximately 15,000 on August 13, 6000 on September 9, but only 25 on the 12th and 21st. This early drop in numbers may be correlated with early frosts, on September 6 and 7.

Detailed observations were made on August 13th. At 7:45 P. M. DST, small numbers of Robins were coming in, a few Grackles in small flocks of Redwings, and a few small flocks of Starlings. By 8 P. M., 7500 Martins were sailing overhead, left, and reappeared later. At 8:15, 200 Barn Swallows, 300 Martins and 25 Cowbirds were to be seen, and by 8:20, there were 5000 Martins. Robins kept arriving in small numbers. At 8:25, Starlings were overhead in flocks of hundreds and thousands, flying low over the trees, while 7500 Martins sailed from 100 to 500 feet in the air. As the moon rose at 8:30, the air was filled with the activity of the circling birds, the Starlings still below the Martins. At 8:35, the Martins, now numbering 15,000, began dropping into the trees, while Starlings continued to arrive by the hundreds. Most of the Martins were in the roost before 8:45.

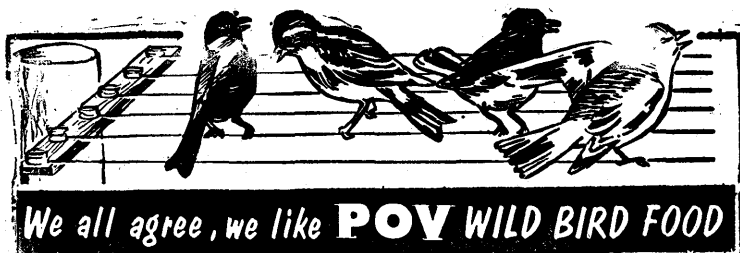
Almost no spring observations of this roost have been made, except for the notation, by Elmer Jones, of large flocks of blackbirds and Starlings at the area in late March of 1962. I myself saw flocks flying toward the roost throughout the spring.

Unanswered questions about this roost are many. How extensively is it used in spring? What about the winter months — after October? Would the numbers involved be found to be even higher, if observers manned the other approaches? What is the future of the roost? If the city clears the area for residential purposes, where will the birds go? From how extensive an area do the birds come, that utilize the roost? Would netting and banding operations answer some questions?

It is hoped that others will visit this roost, make observations and counts, in an attempt to answer the questions.

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