

THE APARTMENT BIRDS

by Ron Reid — Federation of Ontario Naturalists

Gimli, Manitoba, is setting out to make a name for itself. It's not that Gimli is about to host the Olympic Games or erect a covered stadium or anything like that. Gimli has set its sights on something different — to become the purple martin capital of Canada.

Local residents know that the town is a favourite for these dark-coloured swallows, because of its open areas near the lake. And they know that martins love company, often nesting in bird houses that look like miniature apartment buildings. So they simply enlarged on these ideas. On a 15-metre tower erected near the town harbour, enthusiastic martin-lovers have erected a total of 35 of the apartment bird houses, in the hopes of attracting hundreds

of purple martins.

Most of us start on a somewhat smaller scale, but the essential ingredients are the same — open water, lots of space, a martin house erected at least five metres off the ground, and lots of patience. The open water provides an abundance of insects for food, as well as fresh drinks obtained by skimming over the surface with an open bill. The patience is also crucial, since martins seem to wait to inspect a new house for at least a year before gradually moving in.

Most commercial martin houses are now made of aluminum, for durability and ease of cleaning, but my favourites are the old wooden classics. In many a well-established cottage area, martin houses are obviously a source of pride — almost a

status symbol with fancy dormers and filigrees to match any Victorian house.

Purple martins originally nested in hollow trees, caves, or woodpecker holes. Now they are almost entirely dependent on man-made shelters for nesting. Their pleasant voices and voracious appetites for flying insects make martins popular companions, so in their Ontario range north to Kenora and Sudbury, they are unlikely to go without homes. According to the Nature Society, martins will be returning from their winter haunts in Peru to Ontario on April 12. That date may not be exact, but if your martin house is standing at the ready, I'm sure you will be keeping an eye cocked more closely as the day draws near.

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CASPAR STOOP HERB GARDEN

TORONTO — If you dry herbs in a microwave oven they will have better flavour and colour than they would if dried in hanging bunches as was done in pioneer days.

Planting onions or shallots among your carrot seeds, or laying stocks of garlic between the rows will help to prevent carrot maggots from spoiling the crop.

You can keep groundhogs out of your garden by spreading a six-inch band of blood meal around your garden. Blood meal is a product available from most garden supplies outlets.

And who says all these gardening tips will work? Caspar Stoop, that's who. And Caspar is pretty well qualified to know. He's the gardener and groundskeeper at Black Creek Pioneer Village, the living 1850's community on the edge of

Metropolitan Toronto at Jane Street and Steeles Avenue.

The garden is an important feature of the pre-Confederation Village, largely because the vast majority of adult visitors have either flower beds or vegetable gardens, or both, at their own homes. There is great interest in the varieties of flowers and vegetables that were grown in the 1850's and a particular interest in the herb garden — that special spot that produced the zingy tastes and exotic smells grandma (or great-grandma) used to achieve in her kitchen.

Caspar Stoop grows a whole spectrum of spicy plants in the herb garden at the Village. Some are the ones commonly seen on grocery store shelves, others are usually available only at specialty shops, and still others are never seen being sold

commercially. Here's a fairly complete list: sage, marjoram, mint (4 kinds), summer and winter savory, dill, rosemary, costmary, lemon balm, lemon verbena, bee balm, lavender, thyme, horehound, parsley and rue (which some Eurojans use to make a tonic for women who have had babies recently).

A kindly, mid-60's man with a ready smile and bright blue eyes, Stoop was born in the small town of Bovenkirk, in Holland. He served an apprenticeship with his father who was a market gardener and, later, branched into flower growing. For some years before coming to Canada, in 1951, Caspar had had his own market gardening and flower business in Holland. Like so many immigrants arriving in a strange land, he was forced to take what work he could get and entered the construction trade, at Wallaceburg, Ontario.

Moving to Toronto in the summer of 1952, Stoop got a job with a landscape gardening firm and remained with that organization for more than 20 years. In 1975, he answered a newspaper advertisement and found himself stepping back in time more than 100 years, as assistant to Black Creek Pioneer Village gardener, a long-term employee who was about to retire. Shortly thereafter, he was appointed to his present position.

Always meticulous about keeping his vegetable and flower crops authentic for the period, Caspar keeps an eye out for old, hard-to-find 1867 varieties and, what he calls "Heritage" seeds, varieties grown in "the good old days" and which are now available from a pioneer type seed house in the United States. A few vegetable

varieties, such as pumpkins, he says, are much the same as they were 100 years ago.

However, says Stoop, everything wasn't necessarily better "back then", regardless of how warmly nostalgic we may feel about yesteryear. These old varieties are, actually, much more trouble than their modern counterparts because of their increased susceptibility to disease. Also, the taste often isn't as good and the yield, generally, isn't as high. Like earlier generations, too, Caspar has to fight nature and try to ward off rabbits, groundhogs, coons and squirrels from his crops.

Among his other duties at the Village, Stoop sees that lawns are kept presentable and the several kinds of shade trees on the grounds are properly pruned and healthy. Look around Pioneer Village and you'll see maple, walnut, butternut, plane tree, chestnut, mountain, white and green ash, pine, spruce and balsam trees.

Fruit-bearing trees and bushes on the grounds include: apple, pear, crab-apple, gooseberry, red, white and black currant, ground cherry and huckleberry. Also grown are chicory (to mix with coffee); flax (for making linen); broom corn (for use in the broom-maker's shop) and Indian corn (to grind into flour).

In the late fall and winter months, Caspar prepares and grinds herbs, to be sold in the Village gift shop, and dries flowers for use, as in the mid-1800's, in the various houses in the community.

One final tip from Caspar — to dry weeds, cut them when almost ripe, then hang them head down in a dry, dark place. The microwave oven does a good job here, too.



Caspar Stoop, Herb Garden — Pioneer Village



If you're a veteran bird watcher - or "birder" as they prefer to be called - you've likely heard of Norman Chesterfield. The name was new to me until it came over one of the wire services recently that Norman Chesterfield of Wheatley had become the number one bird lister in the world!

I knew that Wheatley was a fishing village in the Windsor area near Point Pelee. So I made an appointment and went down to see the new world's champion birder.

Making an appointment was a wise move. I discovered that the new champ will grab a plane on the spur of the moment and take off to see a rare bird that one of his buddies around the world has sighted, be it in the vast wilderness of the Himalayas or the jungles of Peru!

Norman turned out to be a deceiving guy. He appeared to be about fifty but he's crowding seventy. He was serene, mild mannered, and didn't look like a go-getter at all. But underneath is a seething

competitive spirit. Anyway, that's what his wife, Jean, told me.

He denied this. He said it wasn't a desire to be Number One that drove him. It was just a great interest in birds.

"Don't let him kid you," snapped Jean. "He's a fanatic about winning."

I dropped the subject, and asked him about reaching the astounding record of listing 5,586 species of birds!

He said he'd been working on it for twenty-five years. He's bird-scanned all the oceans and all the continents except Antarctica. He's been to over 125 countries looking for different birds.

He showed me a leather-covered book that lists all families and species of birds. He had a check mark against the ones he has seen. It was impressive.

When he hit the 5,000 mark he knew he had a fighting chance to beat the record held for some time by Stuart Keith of New York.

Then he went to Venezuela and hit the jackpot! He spotted enough birds to beat Keith's record by two species. Since then he's added another twenty-seven.

And he's not resting on his laurels. He's planning to fly to Brazil, then maybe Australia.

Chesterfield hops in and out of planes the way most of us hop in and out of automobiles. And it's a running gag among birders that Norman flies more than most of the birds do.

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