



## Purple Martin



Purple martins are colonial nesters, often using houses such as these. They feed entirely on insects, making them a highly desirable species to attract to your property.

Of the hundreds of species of North American birds, few are as readily sought after as the purple martin, the largest member of the swallow family. This graceful bird, whose iridescent color is often seen flashing in the sun, has a diet of insects. Controlling populations of flies, wasps, locusts, weevils, and mosquitoes is just part of their nature. Highly sociable, martins often nest in colonies and are extremely faithful to their nest site, making them a highly desirable species to attract.

### Purple Martin Natural History

#### Overview

Long before Europeans settled in this country, Native Americans encouraged purple martins to nest in hollow gourds placed near their villages. The martins made good neighbors, eager to consume large quantities of “problem” insects. At that time, martins also nested in tree cavities, caves, and old woodpecker holes.

Today, natural sites for martin colonies are rare. In the East, purple martins are totally dependent upon human-made structures for nesting. Hollowed-out gourds and multi-room apartment houses placed in the proper habitat are attractive nesting sites for purple martins.

#### Habitat

Because martins are aerial feeders, they must have unobstructed air space in which to forage for insects. Thus, purple martins tend to inhabit open country and rural areas, especially near water. Colonies have been established in meadows, farm fields, and golf courses, and near lakes, rivers, and marshes.

#### Nesting Habits

In the spring, males migrate northward several days prior to females, seeking out and defending nesting sites. When the females arrive, they will choose a mate, but nest building may not begin for several weeks. Purple martins build bulky nests of grasses, leaves, mud, and feathers. An average of 4-5 white eggs are laid and incubated by the female for 15-18 days. Once hatched, the young remain in the nest for a long time, 3-4 weeks, so in northern states, there is little time to raise a second brood. In the Southeast and Southwest, second broods are more common.

Purple Martins are not really purple...

...they are dark blue, almost black. Females have gray or white undersides. Their dark feathers sometimes shine with a purple hue.

#### HELPFUL WEB SITE

Purple Martin  
Conservation Association  
[www.purplemartin.org](http://www.purplemartin.org)

#### e-Source

Visit our online information center for fact sheets on a variety of environmental topics:

[www.auduboninternational.org/e-source](http://www.auduboninternational.org/e-source)

Audubon International  
46 Rarick Road  
Selkirk, NY 12158  
(518) 767-9051

## Migration

In August, martins begin to form flocks to prepare for their southward journey. Before nightfall, the birds congregate in groves of trees—quite a sight when one considers hundreds of thousands of martins in a single roost. Come November, when martins leave the U.S. for South America, as many as a million birds may be traveling together in a single flock.

## Attracting Purple Martins

Encouraging martins to take up residence in a martin house on your property is not always an easy task. Proper placement and monitoring of the house is essential, but beyond that, martins have the final say in choosing your site, or passing on. The house must not be within 30-40 feet of trees or buildings, but nearby electrical wires will be used for perching. If sparrows, starlings or other cavity-nesting birds take up residence before martins are established in the house, martins will not nest there. Despite these considerations, once a colony has been established, the birds return year after year, and do not seek new quarters unless absolutely necessary.

### Martin House Dimensions and Placement

House Size:	6 room minimum, 20-30 maximum
Room Dimension:	6"x6"x6"
Opening:	circular, 2 - 2 1/4"
Color:	interior and exterior light or white to reflect heat and deter starlings.
Placement:	30-40 feet from trees or buildings, 10-15 feet from the ground.

### Tips For Attracting Purple Martins

1. Place the martin house 35-40 feet from trees or buildings.
2. Do not allow other birds, such as house sparrows or starlings, to nest in the house. Remove their nest, repeatedly if necessary.
3. Paint the house white. This will help reflect the sun's heat so that the interior does not become too hot for nestlings.
4. Reduce nest site competition with other species of cavity-nesting birds by plugging the holes of the house until 4 weeks after the first scouts are scheduled to return to your area. Early scouts are generally older birds who have already established a nest site. The younger birds will follow and be more likely to choose a new site.
5. Remove vines or shrubs growing under the house. These make it easier for predators to reach the nest.
6. Make sure the house is built to the proper dimensions: 6" x 6" to 6 1/2" x 9" for the compartments; entrance hole 2 - 2 1/4", placed 1" above the floor.
7. Mount the house on a pole that can be easily raised and lowered, such as those that telescope up and down, or raise and lower with a pulley and winch system. This will help you easily remove unwanted sparrow or starling nests, and clean out the house at the end of the summer.
8. Conduct weekly nest checks and record your observations. While this will not disturb the birds, it may save them from predation and will help you take an active role in knowing what is happening in the martin house.