

Creature Feature: Purple Martin (*Progne subis*)

Traveling thousands of miles from points as far away as Brazil and extending all the way to locations in Canada on the North American Continent, Purple Martins find their way into the backyards of thousands of birding enthusiasts. Already uncommon in many of their natural breeding areas, Purple Martins east of the Rocky Mountains have become almost completely dependent on humans.



Map from The Purple Martin Conservation Association

Purple Martins are the largest of the North American swallows, measuring 7 ½ inches long and weighing 1.9 ounces. Monogamous by nature, they spend the non-breeding season in Brazil and then migrate to North America to nest. The older Martins, referred to as ‘scouts’, return to areas where they have nested before, which is a common occurrence in migratory birds. Both male and female cooperate equally in building the nest out of mud, grass and twigs and the female lays two to seven pure white eggs at a rate of one egg per day.

These beautiful birds are one of the first song birds to arrive in the spring and exhibit marked differences between sexes. The adult males are purplish-black and darker on the wings and tail. The females and immature have light bellies; otherwise, their under parts

are grayish and the females often have a faint collar across the lower nape and a duller purplish-black under part than the male. The tail in both sexes is rather long, broad, and forked, indicative of all swallows. And like all swallows, Purple Martins are aerial insectivores. That is, they eat only flying insects, which they catch in flight! And not only do they get all their food in flight, they get all their water that way too, by skimming the surface of a pond and scooping up the water with their lower bill. The Purple Martin's diet consists of dragonflies, damselflies, flies, stink bugs, June bugs, Japanese beetles, butterflies, spiders, bees and grasshoppers, to name a few. These high flying, daytime feeders are not, however, prodigious consumers of mosquitoes, as manufacturers of Martin houses have claimed. Since Purple Martins feed only on flying insects, they are extremely vulnerable to starvation during extended periods of cool and/or rainy weather.

The Purple Martin is not on the threatened or endangered list anymore however, some populations are undergoing a long-term decline. The good news though, is that over one million North Americans put up housing for these birds. And, Native Americans used to hang empty gourds for the Purple Martin before Europeans arrived in North America. Now they almost exclusively nest in birdhouses in North America and can be observed out west using mostly natural cavities such as holes in trees.

If you are considering housing Purple Martins on your property, it is important to note that they have very specific housing and aerial space requirements. And be prepared to deal with native nest-site competitors too, since Eastern bluebirds, Tree Swallows, Great Crested Flycatchers and house Wrens might show an interest in your Martin house or gourds, which should be painted white or a light pastel color. But do not despair, prospective landlords! Remember, the Purple Martins' thousand mile trek will bring them into your backyard -- and as long as you continue to support and protect them, they will return faithfully to your colony sites, year after year.

For more information about the Purple Martin and how to help it thrive in our watershed by hosting it in your yard, please visit the following web sites:

[The Purple Martin Conservation Association](#)

[Cornell Lab of Ornithology](#)

[Listen to a Cornell Lab Recording of the Song of the Purple Martin](#)

[Chuck's Purple Martin Page](#)

[The Purple Martin Society, North America](#)