



A P R O F I L E O F T H E

# Purple Martin

*Progne subis*

**The Purple Martin Story:** Twelve thousand years ago, before the first humans arrived in the Americas, Purple Martins were a dramatically different bird than they are today. At this time, martins nested only in old woodpecker cavities, or in natural cavities in dead trees. Today, east of the Rocky Mountains, martins nest only in human-supplied housing, either in elaborate multiple-room houses, or in natural & artificial gourds. Purple Martins stopped nesting in their ancestral ways because Native American Choctaw, Chickasaw & Cherokee discovered that martins would next in dried, hollow gourds that they hung for them. Over hundreds & perhaps thousands of years, martins gradually gave up their ancestral ways, in a process now known as a "behavioral tradition shift." Eventually a human cultural tradition began & neighboring groups began hanging gourds for martins. When European colonists arrived, they too adopted the

custom of hanging gourds for Purple Martins, but they also supplemented them with wooden houses. Over time, more & more martins chose human-supplied gourds & houses for nesting, and fewer & fewer chose natural cavities. Eventually, by the early 20th century, the eastern race of Purple Martins nested almost exclusively in human-supplied housing. Today, east of the Rockies, Purple Martins are the only bird species totally dependent on humans for supplying them with nesting sites. And they have been managed by man longer than any other North American species. If humans were to stop supplying martins with homes, they would likely disappear as a breeding bird in eastern North America.

**Population Changes:** Twenty-four years of data from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service's / Canadian Wildlife Service's Breeding Bird Survey show that the martin is experiencing long-term regional declines. In the past century, several factors have combined to make martins very scarce in many areas of their breeding range. In the mid 1800's, European Starlings & House Sparrows were introduced from Europe. These two highly aggressive species spread rapidly across the continent, displacing martins by taking over martin houses or destroying nests & young. Other factors, such as habitat loss & a declining human interest in martins from an increasingly urbanized culture have compounded the martins' precarious situation. You can help. If you have open habitat for martins, please consider putting up manageable housing.

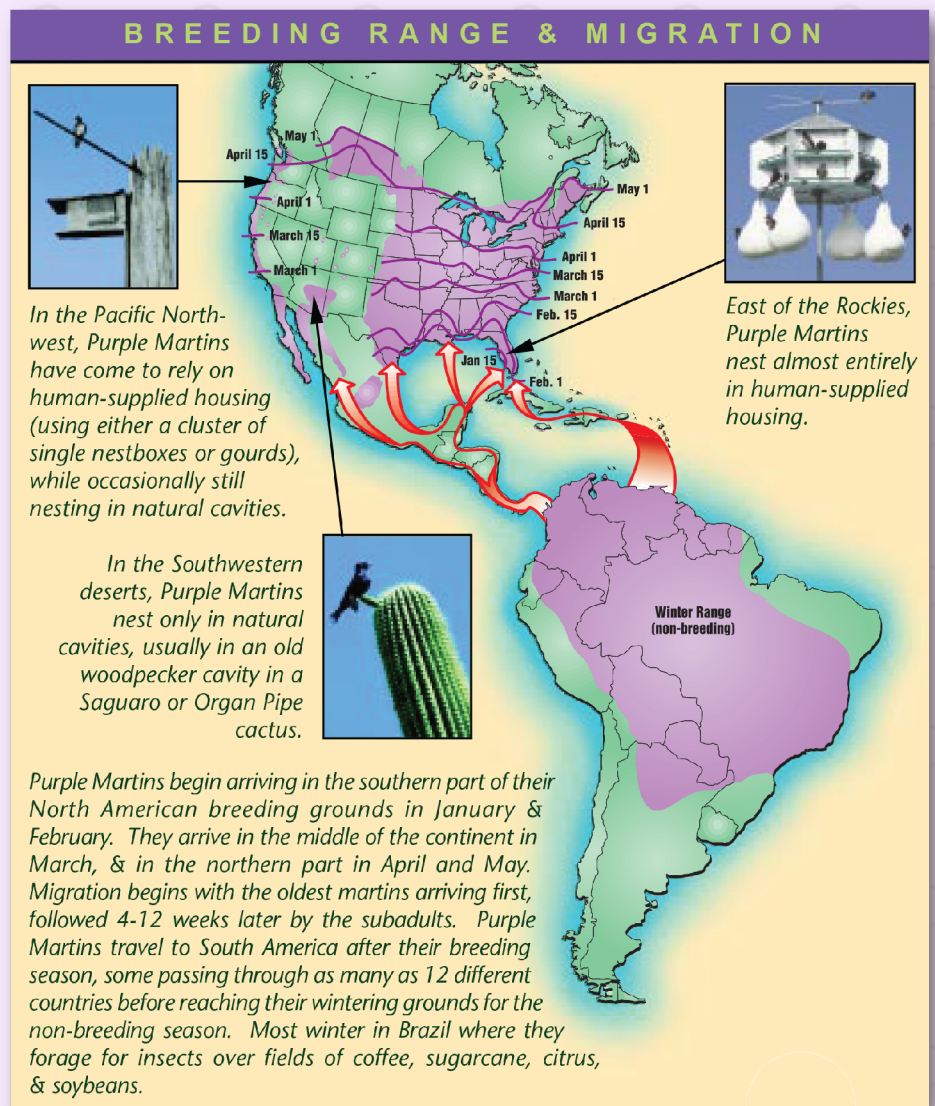


The Purple Martin Conservation Association (PMCA) is an international non-profit organization dedicated to the conservation of the Purple Martin through research, education, & conservation projects. For more information on Purple Martins, contact:

PMCA  
Tom Ridge Environmental Center  
301 Peninsula Drive, Suite 6  
Erie, PA 16505  
[www.purplemartin.org](http://www.purplemartin.org)

# Meet the Purple Martin

Purple Martins are the largest of the nine swallow species found in North America. They have a wing span of 14" to 16", a length of 7", and weigh only 2 ounces (55 grams). The adult male martin has blue-black glossy plumage. Females & young are purplish-brown above with grayish-white underparts. One-year-old males & females (known as "subadults"), can be identified by their unique plumage: subadult males have one or more purple feathers on their throats, stomachs, or undertail coverts, while subadult females are paler overall than adult females. Both subadult martins (1-year-olds) & adult martins (those 2 years old or older) nest & raise young. A Purple Martin can live to be 13 years old, but most live only 4 or 5 years.



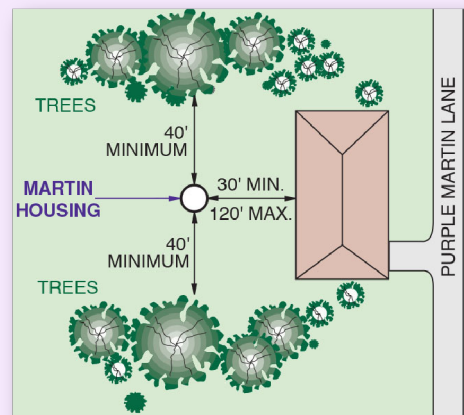


# How Can You Help Purple Martins?

Silhouette of a Purple Martin in Flight.



Choose the right location. Housing should be placed in the center of the most open spot available, about 30 - 120 feet from human housing. The farther the housing is placed from trees, the better, but there should be no trees taller than the martin housing within 40 feet. Keep tall bushes, shrubs, and vines away from the pole. Housing height should be about 10 - 17 feet.



## Choose Housing That Works

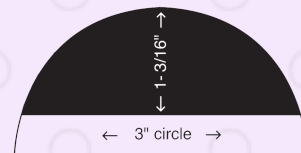


Control European Starlings & House Sparrows

These two non-native species will take over martin housing, destroy eggs, kill nestlings, & chase off martins. Since starlings & House Sparrows are not native species, they are not protected & may be controlled by nest removal, trapping or shooting.

Look for housing designed to raise & lower vertically, & with easy access to compartments or gourds. Landlords may need to lower housing daily to evict nest-site competitors, or to check on martin nestings. Systems that telescope up & down, or raise & lower with a winch & pulley, are the most practical; avoid a pole that tilts or is stationary. Paint houses & gourds white to reflect heat. Compartment floor dimensions should be at least 6" x 6", but larger compartments (7" wide x 12" long) offer better protection from predators & weather, and are much preferred by martins. Make entrance holes about 2 inches in diameter. Many martin landlords are now using crescent-shaped entrance holes that help keep starlings out of martin housing. Install a pole guard on every pole (wooden or metal), for protection against climbing predators like raccoons and rat snakes.

A crescent-shaped entrance hole, exactly 1-3/16" high by 2-7/8" wide, is very effective at keeping starlings out of martin houses & gourds.



## Keep Records

Monitor nests weekly and keep written records. Nest checks will not cause martins to abandon their young, and landlords who conduct regular nest checks will be more successful, simply because they'll discover potential problems in time to correct them.





# Raising A Family



Martins nest just once each year. Nests are made of twigs, grasses, & mud. Just before egg-laying, martins line their nest cup with fresh green leaves that help control parasites (such as fleas) in the nest. The female lays one egg a day. She incubates her clutch of 3 to 7 eggs for 16 days. Newly hatched martins are featherless, blind, & helpless. They grow rapidly & usually leave the nest after 1 - 2 weeks, learning to feed during the day & returning to the nest at night. The same martins will return to nest at the same colony site each year, but most of their offspring will disperse to nest elsewhere.



## What Do They Eat?

A martin's diet consists entirely of flying insects of all sizes (such as flies, dragonflies, damselflies, grasshoppers, butterflies & beetles) that they catch while both they and the insects are in flight. Martins drink & bathe on the wing as well, landing on the ground only to mate & pick up nest material. It is a myth, however, that martins consume great numbers of mosquitoes.

