

Attracting Purple Martins

Purple Martin Conservation Association

Educate Yourself. Learn everything you can about Purple Martins. Talk with other martin landlords and visit the web site (www.purplemartin.org) of the Purple Martin Conservation Association (PMCA), an international nonprofit organization dedicated to aiding Purple Martins through landlord education and scientific research. Read the book: *Enjoying Purple Martins More* by Richard Wolinski and or the *Stokes' Purple Martin Book*, by Donald & Lillian Stokes. Join the PMCA and receive the informative *Purple Martin Update* magazine.

Choose the Right Location. (See diagrams) Martins have very specific space requirements. One of the main reasons people fail to attract martins is that they place their martin housing incorrectly. Martin housing should be in the center of the largest open spot available, about 30-120 feet from human housing. Place the housing where you can see it so you can enjoy watching and hearing the martins. There should be no trees within 40 feet, preferably 60 feet, of the housing. In the southern half of their breeding range, martins are less fussy about house placement, so sometimes housing can be within 25 feet of trees and still attract martins. But the farther housing is placed from trees, the better. Housing height should be in the range of 10-17 feet. Don't attach wires that lead to trees, buildings, or the ground to the house or pole, as they may allow predators to access the housing.

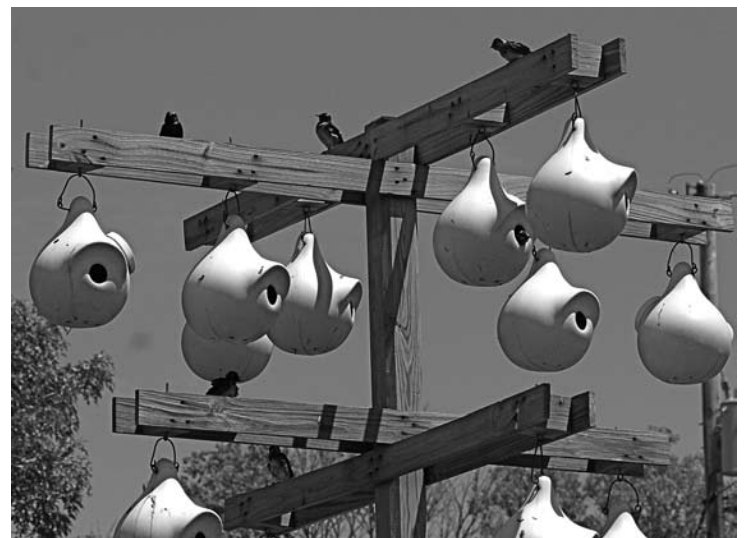
Put Up Manageable Housing. Your chances for success will be better if your housing is easy to manage. Choose a pole that telescopes, or is equipped with a winch or rope & pulley, and housing that has easy access to the compartments. Houses and gourds should be white, or a light color. White housing attracts martins best and reflects sunlight, keeping nestlings cooler. Cavity



floor dimensions should be at least 6" x 6" but larger cavities (7" x 12") are preferred by the martins, and offer better protection from predators and rain. Unfortunately, larger compartments are also attractive to European Starlings, but a modification to the entrance hole will minimize starling problems. A round entrance hole of 2-1/8" is preferred by the martins, but a range from 1-3/4" to 2-3/8" will work. Make sure there is adequate ventilation and drainage in each nest on cavity. Many houses can be improved. Add insulation to the attic, remodel interiors to offer larger compartments, and add porch dividers to houses with shared porches. Dividers keep males from claiming extra cavities and can improve occupancy rates. They also keep nestlings from wandering to other compartments where they can steal food from younger nestlings, causing them to starve.

Open Housing at the Right Time. At active sites, the first martins usually return within a week or two of the previous years'

arrival dates. (See adult migration-timing map). Landlords should have housing ready, but keep it closed until some martins are back. Adult martins can sometimes be attracted to new sites, especially if their nesting attempt failed the previous year, or if the new site offers superior housing or location. At uncolonized sites, you can open housing when the "scouts" are due in hopes of attracting adult martins. But be prepared to keep your site free of House Sparrows and starlings (see tips on next page) through both adult and subadult arrival periods. Be ready to supply single boxes or gourds for any native nest-site competitors (Eastern Bluebirds, Tree Swallows & Great Crested Flycatchers) that try to claim martin housing. Don't be discouraged



if you are unsuccessful at attracting adults. Keep trying while subadults are arriving. Subadult martins (last year's young) will colonize new sites or join existing sites. They begin arriving 4 weeks after the first adults in the northern third of the breeding range (see migration map), 6 weeks after adults in the center third, or 8 weeks after adults in the southern third of the breeding range. Martin migration is a drawn-out affair, and martins can begin nesting up through the end of June, range-wide. Keep your housing ready; don't close it up or let other birds use it.

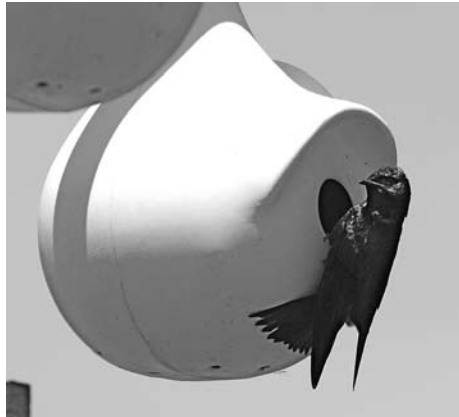
Increase Your Chances. A few things can be done to make your site more attractive to Purple Martins. Offer a combination of houses and gourds. Play a dawn song recording. Add a Purple Martin decoy or two. Place 1-2" of nesting material into each compartment.

Don't Close it Too Soon. Don't close the entrances, or take the housing down, until late August, as fledglings will be searching for next year's breeding sites in late summer.

Protect Your Housing from Predators. Once you attract Purple Martins, don't assume that because you never see any predators there are none around. Raccoons, snakes, and owls raid bird houses at night. Few experiences are more painful than losing all your martins because you didn't equip your poles and housing with guards. Since all martin poles, wood or metal, are easily climbed by rat snakes, squirrels, and raccoons, the poles require climbing animal barriers. You can install guards before or after your martins have arrived. In areas with fire ants, Teflon spray or tape, or use a ring of petroleum jelly (or grease) on the pole. This will stop the ants. Grease won't stop snakes or raccoons, so install a pole guard, too. External guards on the housing itself protect against aerial raids by hawks, owls, and crows.

Conduct Weekly Nest Checks, Daily Walk-unders, and Keep Written Records. Although many landlords are reluctant to check on their tenants

during the nesting season, it's one of the most valuable practices landlords can adopt. Nest checks will not cause martins to abandon their young. If your martin housing raises and lowers vertically, as it should, number the compartments, check the nests weekly, and keep written records. Landlords who conduct regular nest



checks will be more successful simply because they'll discover any problems in time to correct them. In addition to weekly checks, walk under the housing daily to look for plucked martin feathers, shed owl feathers, cast owl pellets, thrown-out nestlings, hatched eggshells, etc. The items you find are clues to what's going on and may alert you to problems that need your attention. We strongly urge you to register your colony site with the Purple Martin Conservation Association and to participate in its "Project Martinwatch."

Supply These Aids. Crushed eggshell or oystershell is a valuable dietary supplement that supplies calcium and grit, and helps prevent calcium deficiencies in nestlings. Offer it all season in an elevated platform feeder. Eggshells should be rinsed, dried thoroughly in a 200-degree oven (to kill bacteria), then crushed into small pieces. Landlords can supply nest material by scattering dried pine needles (long, soft ones such as White Pine), dry twigs, or a bale of straw in an open area. Create a supply of mud nearby for nest building. During martin-killing weather extremes, toss crickets or mealworms to your martins.

Be Prepared for Problems. Keep the phone number of a licensed wildlife

rehabilitator or your state wildlife agency handy. They are a sick or injured bird's best chance for survival. Place fallouts back in their own nest (your records will help). If it's not possible to put them back in, take them to a rehabber. Don't try to raise them yourself. It's illegal and your good intentions cannot replace the experience of a specialist. If parasites or wet nests threaten the survival of nestlings, replace the nest material with clean, dry wood shavings or pine straw. Never use pesticides in nest boxes. It's illegal and they are not safe for the birds.

Practice Active Management by Controlling House Sparrows and European Starlings. Starlings and House Sparrows will take over compartments, destroy eggs, and kill nestlings. They can also prevent martins from nesting at unestablished sites. Adult martins are often injured or killed by starlings. Successful martin landlords do not tolerate these nonnative nest-site competitors. Starlings and House Sparrows are not protected (since they are not native birds) and may be controlled by trapping, shooting, and nest tear-outs. You can also use starling-resistant entrances (cut crescent entrances 1-3/16" high by 3" wide, and placed no higher than 1/2" above the porch floor). If native birds (Tree Swallows, wrens, bluebirds, or flycatchers) try to nest in your martin housing, close it and put up single-unit boxes for these desirable species elsewhere on your property. Re-open the martin housing once the new box has been accepted.

Keep Your Housing in Good Repair. Remove nests and scrub housing with a 10% bleach solution (1 part bleach to 9 parts water). Rinse and air dry before storing or closing for the winter. Take care of any needed repairs now, so you won't be caught unprepared next spring. All types of housing will last longer if stored indoors over the winter. If housing is left out, plug the holes. Otherwise House Sparrows and starlings will claim it in late winter and be impossible to dislodge come spring.

Photos by Pat Ready