

## Purple Martins -- Attracting & Managing

### Species Profile

- The pair-bond of the Purple Martin is monogamous.
- The male and female cooperate equally in building the nest out of mud, grass and twigs.
- The female lays two to seven pure-white eggs at a rate of one egg per day.
- The female incubates the clutch for approximately fifteen days, then the young hatch.
- Both parents feed the young continuously for a period of 26-32 days until the young fledge.
- The young are dependent on their parents for food and training for an additional one to two weeks after fledging.
- Fledglings may return to the Martin Houses at night to sleep during this period.
- Martins, like all swallows, are aerial insectivores.
- They eat only flying insects, which they catch in flight.
- Their diet is diverse: dragonflies, damselflies, flies, midges, mayflies, stinkbugs, leafhoppers, Japanese beetles, June bugs, butterflies, moths, grasshoppers, cicadas, bees, wasps, flying ants, and ballooning spiders.
- Martins are not, however, prodigious consumers of mosquitoes as is so often claimed.
- Martins are daytime feeders, and feed high in the sky.
- Purple Martins feed only on flying insects; they are extremely vulnerable to starvation during extended periods of cool and/or rainy weather.

### Timing

- **At active sites:** The first martins usually return within a week or two of the previous years' arrival dates.
- Landlords should have housing ready, but keep it closed until some martins are back.
- Adult martins can sometimes be attracted to new sites, 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,
  - Be prepared to keep your site free of House Sparrows and Starlings.
  - Be ready to supply 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 sub adults are arriving.
  - Sub adult martins (last year's young) will colonize new sites or join existing sites.
  - They begin arriving 4 weeks to 8 weeks after adults in 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.

### Location

- Martins have very specific aerial space requirements.
- Housing should be placed in the center of the most open spot available, about 30-120 feet from human housing.
- There should be no trees taller than the martin housing within 40 feet, preferably 60 feet.
- Generally, the farther the housing is placed from trees, the better.
- Height of the housing can be anywhere from 10-20 feet.
- Keep tall bushes, shrubs and vines away from the pole.
- Do not attach wires to a martin house, especially if they lead to trees, buildings, or to the ground.

- Boat docks make ideal locations for mounting a martin house or gourd rack.

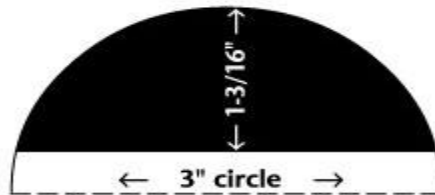
### Competition

- All birds set up territories around their nest sites and defend them against other birds.
- **At un-established sites:** If House Sparrows or European Starlings lay first claim to martin housing, and nest, then chase off investigating martins.
- **At established colony sites:** House Sparrows and Starlings will fight with nesting martins, kill the young, or break eggs.
- **Controlling nest-site competitors** may require repeated lowering the housing and removing competitor's nests.
- **Non-native birds,** House Sparrow and European Starling, may require trapping and/or shooting.
- Starling-resistant entrance holes can be used to keep starlings from claiming martin housing.
- **Native bird** species that try to nest: Temporarily plug all entrance holes with door stops or paper cups.
- Put up appropriate, single-unit housing elsewhere on your property for these birds.
- Once these other birds have accepted the new housing, reopen the martin housing.
- Housing should be stored inside or closed up for the winter to keep paper wasps, squirrels, and other birds from claiming the house before the martins return.

### Housing

- Houses and **gourds** should be painted white, or a light pastel color; trim can be any color.
- White housing seems to attract martins best. White reflects the heat of the sun, keeping nestling's cooler.
- Compartment **floor** should be at least 6"x6", but 7"x12" is better protection against predators and weather.
- Compartment **height** can be from 5" to 7" high.
- Place entrance **hole** about 1" above the floor.
- **Hole size** can range from 1-3/4" up to 2-1/4", but **2-1/8"** is recommended.
- Look for housing designed to raise and lower vertically, with easy access to compartments.
- Landlords may need to lower housing daily to evict nest-site competitors, or to check on martin nestlings.
- Systems that telescope up and down, or raise and lower with a pulley and winch, are the most practical.
- Nest checks will not cause martins to abandon their nests or their colony site.
- Number the compartments and keep written records.

### Starling resistant entrance hole (SREH)



This entrance hole will exclude most starlings (and all Screech Owls.) The height dimension (1 & 3/16") is extremely critical. If made a hair too big, starlings will get in; if made a hair too small, martins won't be able to. Also, the hole placement is very important; the bottom of the entrance hole should be no more than 1/2" above the porch, and is most effective in excluding starlings when placed flush with the porch and compartment floor. **This hole will also work on gourds**, both natural and plastic, as well as aluminum houses. When cutting this hole in wood houses or plastic/natural gourds, use a jigsaw, and cut it slightly small, then file or sand it to the proper height.



Hole Shapes



Troyer Gourd-horizontal  
-round entrance



SREH & Round Hole  
with Clean-out



Troyer Tunnel Hole unit

**Natural Gourd** supplies available: Gourds, Canapés, Pouches, 4” Cleanout ports, Troyer Tunnel Hole unit and more.

Go to [www.purplemartin.org](http://www.purplemartin.org) and type in “natural gourds” for educational articles on PM Gourd Houses, templates, making, caring, cleaning and more.

For more information, contact:

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

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