

How to Attract Purple Martins

Centuries before European man first colonized North America, Native American Indians were enticing Purple Martins to nest within their villages by suspending hollowed-out gourds from their dwellings. Later, the early settlers were quick to adopt the custom of attracting martins to their yards. In the early 1840's when John James Audubon was traveling around the continent making his historic bird paintings, he recorded in his journals that "*Almost every country tavern has a Martin box on the upper part of its signboard; and I have observed that the handsomer the box, the better does the inn generally prove to be.*"

Today, martins are just as popular and sought after as they were back in Audubon's day, and for good reason. Purple Martins are quite friendly and prefer to nest in proximity to man, in fact, they are the only bird species totally dependent on human-supplied nest boxes. Other qualities that make martins desirable are that they nest in colonies and have fascinating social behavior; their vocalizations are quite beautiful; they are extremely graceful in flight; they consume vast quantities of insects; and they are compatible with all other types of native yard birds. And, although they migrate to South America for the winter, they remain incredibly faithful to their colony sites from one summer to the next, often returning about the same date each year. All of these qualities combine to endear martins to their human hosts and make them one of the most pleasurable and entertaining of birds to have around.

Habitat Requirements for Martins

Since martin houses can be time-consuming to build and relatively expensive to buy (commercially-built martin houses can cost anywhere from \$75.00 to \$275.00), it is a good idea to first evaluate your chances of attracting martins. First, determine whether you live within the breeding range of the Purple Martin (see the enclosed map). Next, evaluate your habitat. Martins tend to establish colonies near broad open areas - such as meadows; fields, farmland, swamps,



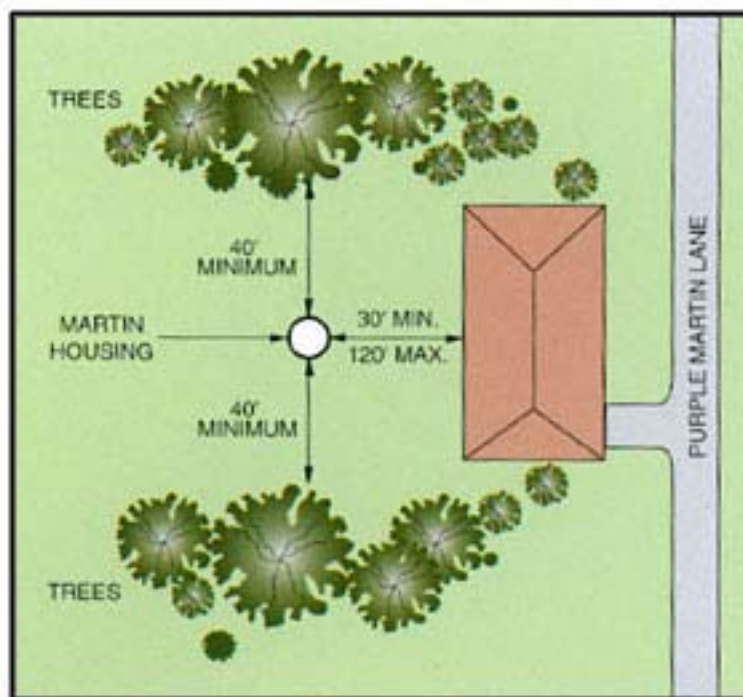
ponds, lakes, bays, and rivers, but these habitats are not strict requirements. For instance, martins can be attracted to residential areas, but if you live on a mountain top, in a heavy

forest, in a central metropolitan area, or in a neighborhood completely covered by dense tree canopies, your chances of attracting them are poor, mainly because martins are aerial feeders that must have unobstructed air space in which to forage for flying insects.

Yard Requirements for Attracting Martins

If the surrounding habitat seems appropriate, then determine whether there is sufficient “openness” at the exact site you propose to place the martin housing. In general, there should not be any trees or buildings within about 40 feet of the martin pole in any direction. The taller the surrounding trees, the greater the distance a martin house should be placed from them. A martin house should always be placed in the *center* of the largest opening you have in your yard. If you choose to erect additional housing, they can be

placed as close or as far away from the original housing as you prefer.



If your location meets the requirements listed above, you have a good chance of attracting martins. But be patient, while some people successfully attract martins right away, others wait years, and still others never get them no matter how hard they try nor how seemingly “perfect” their locations appear. Part of the challenge is that success is never guaranteed. However, once you are successful, you can go out and celebrate, because with proper management, you’ve probably got them for life.

Offering Gourds, Houses, or Both

No matter how perfect your location, you will not attract martins without first supplying them with proper nesting facilities in the form of pole-mounted martin houses or gourds. Look around to determine what type of housing martins are successfully using in the areas nearby your proposed site. It’s often a good idea to use the same type of housing. Martins show just about equal preference between houses and gourds and many martin enthusiasts offer *both*. Contrary to what martin house manufacturers would like you to believe, martins do just as well nesting in gourds as they do in houses.

Each type of housing has advantages and disadvantages. One advantage that gourds have over martin houses is that a cluster of them can achieve 100% occupancy,

whereas conventionally-designed martin houses tend not to fill more than about 50-65% of their rooms at once based on our experiences. This is because male martins claim and defend several adjacent compartments in houses. This means that a 24-compartment martin house will rarely attract more than 12-16 nesting pairs. So don't ever expect to "fill" a martin house. When your martin house reaches the 50-65% occupancy level, it's technically "full" and you'll have to offer additional housing if you want your colony to continue growing. Many martin landlords unknowingly inhibit the growth of their colonies by waiting (forever) for their first house to completely fill before adding a second.

Another advantage gourds have is that they swing and sway in the wind, a fact that makes them quite attractive to martins, but less attractive to the martin's worst nest-site robbers, the introduced European starling and English house sparrow. Gourds are also less expensive than martin houses, especially on a per cavity basis. However, martin houses last longer than gourds, are more commercially available, are slightly easier to clean out, and enjoy a much wider popularity.

Choosing and Preparing Gourds

Gourds have been used successfully to attract Purple Martins ever since Native Americans roamed North America. Many martin fanciers believe real gourds are still the best attraction devices. Some commercially-manufactured ceramic gourds have attracted Purple Martins, but their weight can make them difficult to manage on certain types of poles. Plastic gourds are also available.

Real gourds, if available, should be carefully selected and be at least eight inches in diameter and six inches in height. Purple Martins prefer large gourds, prepared properly, with separate holes bored for the entrance, hanging wire, and water drainage. Thick-skinned, properly-cured gourds with short necks are ideal because they will last longer, provide insulation from heat and cold, and not waste hanging space on the suspension system. Sand any mold off the gourds before varnishing or painting them. White, or a light color, helps reflect the sun's rays and prolongs the usefulness of the gourds, while keeping their interiors cooler.

To prepare gourds, cut a 2-inch, round entrance hole in the side of each gourd, 3-5 inches up from the inside floor. Remove all pith and seeds. For drainage; bore at least four 1/4-inch holes at the lowest point of each gourd's floor. Be sure these holes are free of any debris. Approximately 1-2 inches down from the top of the gourd, bore two 1/4-inch holes, offset 180 degrees, for hanging the gourds. Gourds can be hung along a line strung between two 10 to 15-foot poles placed out in the open, or attached to a wooden crossarm nailed to the top of a single, tall, pivoting pole. As few as 6-8 gourds can get a person started.

Martin Houses: To Buy or Build?

The decision to *buy* versus *build* a martin depends on your financial resources, woodworking talents, and available time. One of the most frequently asked martin questions is "What type of house do martins prefer, wooden or metal?" Martins don't have a preference; they are just as likely to use one as the other. As a general rule, metal

birdhouses are not a good idea, but martin houses are an exception. Most commercially-available aluminum martin houses are designed with adequate ventilation and are treated with light-colored, reflective paints that help keep them cool inside. They also are significantly lighter in weight than homemade wooden houses, an important consideration when it comes time to take them down for sparrow nest clean-out or year-end cleaning and storage. However, homemade martin houses still are a popular and economical alternative to the commercial way.

If you decide to build your own martin house, you should start with a good set of blueprints; have access to wood-working tools, and have lots of time on your hands. Construction can require 15-30 hours of labor and cost anywhere from \$40.00-\$75.00 in materials, depending on the size and complexity of design you choose. Attracting a colony of martins to a house you have built yourself can evoke one of the greatest feelings of pride known to man.

Martin House Requirements

Every martin house should incorporate the following characteristics:

- **Proper Dimensions.** The nesting compartments should be at least 6" x 6" x 6", preferably larger, and be completely separated from each other by partitions. Each compartment must have its own entrance hole with a diameter of 2" (a quarter of an inch in either direction is also acceptable), placed approximately 1 1/2" above the compartment floor. Most martin houses have porches outside each hole and some even have porches with railings, but martins will accept houses having neither.
- **Ventilation and Proper Color.** Because martin houses must be erected in wide-open areas where they are exposed to direct sunlight all day, they must have features that prevent overheating. Houses should be adequately ventilated and be painted white or some other light pastel color in order to best reflect the sun's heat. Trim can be painted any color.
- **Places for Perching.** Because martins like to have places *outside* of their nest compartments for loafing, sunbathing, and preening, they need places where they can perch. For these activities martins often will use nearby wires, television antennas, or other elevated structures out in the open, but a martin house should also provide perching places. A house that has porches, roof perches, or pole perches is an added attraction to them, but in the absence of these, martins will use the peaks and lips of the martin house roof for perching.
- **Ease of Maintenance.** Martin houses should be easy to clean and store for the winter. Commercial houses often have telescoping poles that allow houses to be raised and lowered easily for clean out. Homemade wooden houses are often heavy, requiring solid 4"x4" posts for support. These should be hinged at the bottom so that they can be pivoted down for house maintenance.

- **Proper Pole Height.** Martin houses should be placed on poles 12-20 feet above the ground, although houses placed as low as 6-10 feet have been successfully colonized. Houses mounted on shorter poles do have the advantage of being serviceable from a stepladder, but when offered a choice, martins prefer houses mounted higher in the air.
- **Accessible Nest Compartment.** The ideal house is designed so that each compartment is accessible for nest clean out. If you build a homemade house with stackable tiers, do not use nails or screws to hold the tiers together. Instead, use a hook-and-eye arrangement. Compartments of commercial aluminum houses should have removable front panels or other means for nest compartment access.
- **Expandability.** Although martins will nest in single-compartment boxes, a typical martin house will contain at least 4, and usually 12-24 compartments. But, there really is no limit to the number of compartments a martin house can have. Martin houses are usually built in tiers, with each tier containing 4, 6, 8, or 12 apartments. Some homemade houses and most commercial ones are expandable, allowing extra tiers to be added as the colony grows. Expandability is a nice option to have in a martin house, but it is not a requirement.
- **Predator Guards.** Cats, raccoons, opossums, squirrels, and rat snakes frequently climb martin poles and eat adult martins, their eggs, and young. Unfortunately, a raid by one of these predators can cause the total abandonment of a colony. Despite this fact, nearly all martin landlords leave their martin houses unprotected from the ravages of these climbing predators. Part of the problem is that most people mistakenly believe that raccoons and rat snakes cannot climb metal poles or get past metal *collars* on wooden poles. The fact is, they can. Because *collars* are flush to the pole or post, a snake or a raccoon can shimmy or slither right over them. Every responsible martin landlord should protect their colony with a pole-mounted predator guard *cone*. A *cone* sticks out from a martin pole and should have a radius of at least 15 inches. On wooden poles they should be mounted at least seven feet high, above the leaping range of cats and squirrels. On metal poles they can be mounted lower.

Colony Management

A martin colony needs to be managed actively, just like you would weed, water, and fertilize a garden. Admittedly, it can be work, but the rewards of your effort will be worth it. Too many martin house owners are satisfied if *any* type of bird uses their martin housing. These people are unknowingly hurting the martin by letting their martin housing become breeding slums for the martin's worst enemies, introduced European Starling and House Sparrow. These nest-site competitors should **NOT** be allowed to nest in your martin houses. Their aggressive actions toward martins can prevent the establishment of new colonies and seriously reduce the success of active colonies. House Sparrows and starlings can be discouraged from using your martin housing through repeated nest removal or trapping. The lowering of martin houses for House Sparrow and starling nest

clean out causes only a very temporary, minor disturbance to martins and will not cause them to abandon the site. **WARNING: Martin houses on hinged poles should NOT be tilted down during the breeding season for starling/sparrow nest clean out if occupied by martins. Martin eggs and young will roll out.**

Should Tree Swallows, Eastern Bluebirds, or other desirable native birds start showing an interest in your newly-placed martin house, immediately plug the holes and put up appropriate single-unit boxes for these other birds elsewhere on your property. Do not unplug the martin house until these other birds have either become established at the new boxes or moved elsewhere.

When to Put up Martin Housing

This depends on where you live and whether or not you already have an established colony. The return migration from South America lasts from early-January in the southernmost United States, through mid-June in the northern parts of their range. Martins do not return until the weather turns mild and their food in the form of flying insects becomes available. If you already have an established colony, your earliest returning martins will let you know when they're back by vocalizing loudly, sitting on the empty house poles, or hovering in the airspace where their houses were the previous year.

The oldest martins (the so-called "scouts") start arriving in southern Florida in mid-January, but don't start reaching Canada until mid-April (see the accompanying "Range and Scout-arrival Map" that shows the average dates on which the oldest martins are known to return to long-established colony sites). Yearling martins (the ones hatched the previous summer) don't start returning until 4-6 weeks *after* the older birds do. In general, it's these yearling birds that start new colonies because older birds remain extremely faithful to their previous nesting sites. Therefore, if you open a newly-placed house at the time the "scouts" are supposed to return to your area, you're in for 4-6 weeks of unnecessary House Sparrow and starling control because you probably won't attract any "homeless" adult martins during that time. However, there is an exception to this rule. If there are other active colony sites in your immediate neighborhood, you could succeed in luring adult martins away from their previous nesting places if your location is superior or if their old housing has fallen into disrepair. It is a myth, however, that "scouts" start new colonies by finding new houses and leading "their colonies" back to them. The individual martins that congregate at a breeding site are termed a "colony" by biologists, but they do not travel or function as a unit. Even in the extreme southern part of the martin's breeding range, new housing can be put up as late as mid-June and still attract nesting martins.

When to Take Your Martin Housing Down

If no martins nest in your martin housing the first year they are up, do not get discouraged, and do not take them down until early September. In late summer, the juvenile (fledging) martins produced during the current year breeding season seek out new sites where they will breed the following year. Also, a certain percentage of yearlings

don't find mates and spend part of their summer wandering over new territory searching for future nesting sites. Some of these non-breeders may live in your housing temporarily until the fall migration begins. Also, martins may discover your housing during fall migration and return to breed the following year. Therefore, if you take your housing down too soon (or don't even bother to put any up because you "missed the scout"), you will miss these possible late-season visitations and decrease your chances of attracting martins again the following year. For these reasons, it's never too late to put up a martin house.

When you do take the housing down, remove the old nests and hose out each compartment with soap and water. Wooden houses and gourds should be repainted and repaired as needed. Store houses and gourds out of the weather to prolong their life. Rodents like to chew on gourds, so take necessary precautions. If you leave your martin houses or gourds out all winter, plug their holes to prevent unwanted birds from becoming established.

Establishing and hosting a martin colony can be one of the most enjoyable, entertaining, and educational of human experiences, certainly worth the time, effort, and expense it might require to get started. In fact people who host Purple Martins inevitably discover they've become attached to "their" birds in ways quite unexpected. Why not give "martineering" a try? You might just discover a pleasure you never knew existed.

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