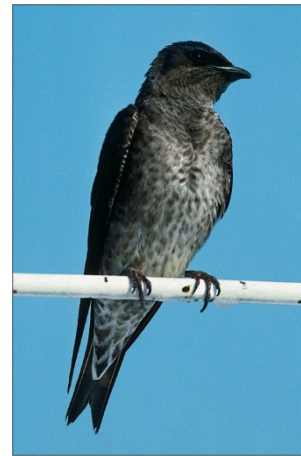
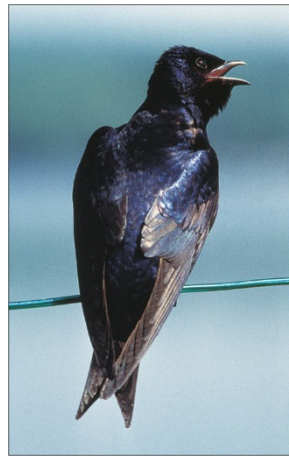


Cavity Nester Spotlight: Purple Martin

Purple Martins (*Progne subis*) are the largest swallow of the Western Hemisphere at about 7 ¾ inches in length, 1 ¾ ounces, and wingspan of 15 inches. They eat only airborne insects, are known as very high flyers, and are beloved for their beautiful chortles and song, often vocal while they are circling in the air in long, speedy, looping circles. Mature males have dark, purple-hued feathers on the back and underside when seen in the sun, whereas females are grey/brown with a speckled buffy breast. As long-distance migrants, they spend winters in the Amazon and return north in the spring to breed. Purple Martins begin to arrive in the Southern states in January from their wintering areas in South America. They start to arrive in Michigan about April 1, with the after-second-year (ASY) males and a few ASY females arriving first and often suffering dangerously cold and bugless weather to secure the optimal nesting cavities from previous years. The sub-adults (hatchlings from the year before) arrive in Michigan in early May through June, seeking their first nesting sites.



Purple Martins prefer colonies ranging in size from a handful of nesting pairs to hundreds of birds. Although a subspecies exists further west, those east of the Rocky Mountains nest entirely in human-provided housing. Many generations of behavioral learning has resulted in this preference that provides the safest, most reliable location for raising their young. Former tree cavity and embankment preferences were abandoned, due likely to habitat destruction and competition from non-native species such as House Sparrows and European Starlings. They prefer protection afforded by landlords who manage for their success.



Purple Martins require open nesting locations but do not need to be by water. They are seeking food resources and open flying space with tall trees a distance away, which also deters predators. Martin housing should be erected within 125 feet of a human structure and consists of large, boxy houses with multiple nesting compartments and/or a group of hanging gourds positioned on a 12-foot-tall pole that can be raised and lowered for human management. Optimal nesting cavities should be about 7 X12 inches with a preferred Starling-resistant opening

instead of the more traditional round opening. *(See openings in gourds in above picture)*



Martins build somewhat flat nests with various materials but always line the nest with green leaves just before laying 2 to 8 white eggs. Incubation is 15-18 days, and fledging will take another month or so as they must be ready to fly from the nest; the parents will not care for them on the ground. Having only one seasonal brood is a great disadvantage, and while other native species may nest in the housing, non-native House Sparrows and European Starlings are their biggest challenge. As with bluebirds, it's extremely important to actively monitor martin housing and prevent these non-native birds from successfully nesting.

Martin landlords love these birds for their gregarious personalities and loud, clear, chirping song. Unfortunately, due to nest cavity shortages, changing weather patterns, and insect shortages from native tree and plant destruction and insecticides, this aerial insectivore species is declining. While their prey consists of some beneficial insects like dragonflies, they eat many pest insects that can harm plants, trees, and crops. They also make beautiful, entertaining "backyard pets" that with a little human management may decide to nest at the home of a friend of Purple Martins.



1Martin Chick about to be banded.

For more information, go to the excellent websites: www.purplemartin.org or visit <https://www.michiganaudubon.org/bfc/puma/>