

Purple Martin (*Progne subis*)

Description: Our biggest swallow in the Eastern US. Dark, glossy-blue males and brown females will peer from the entrances and chirp from the rooftops all summer. They have angular, pointed wings, and a forked tail. Their song is a liquid gurgling warble or a penetrating tee-tee-tee.

Trend: Declining

Habitat: In the Eastern US, Purple Martins breed in any kind of semi-open area where nest sites are provided, especially near a pond or river. Purple Martins forage over towns, cities, parks, open fields, dunes, streams, wet meadows, beaver ponds, and other open areas. Native Americans hung up empty gourds for the Purple Martin before Europeans arrived in North America. When humans began supplying nest boxes for them, eastern martins became closely associated with people and today they are found living almost exclusively near cities and towns.

Purple Martins fly with quick flaps and glides, outlining big circles in the sky as they hunt insects. A year-round insectivore, the Purple Martin eats flying insects at altitudes higher than other swallows, often exceeding 150 feet and sometimes 500 feet or more off the ground. They rarely land on the ground except to collect nesting material and pick up grit to aid their digestion. The Purple Martin not only gets all its food in flight, it also gets all its water that way too. It skims the surface of a pond and scoops up the water with its lower bill.

Ways You can help with Conservation: Purple Martins are fairly common birds, especially in the southeastern U.S., but their numbers declined by approximately 0.5% per year,

resulting in a cumulative decline of about 25% between 1966 and 2019, according to the [North American Breeding Bird Survey](#). Reasons for decline are not well known, but competition with starlings, English house sparrows and other cavity nesters for nest sites may be involved. Widespread insect (food) declines are impacting purple martins and other aerial insectivores.

Ways to help this species is similar to other aerial insectivores including planting native plants, eliminating pesticide spraying including



Photo by Becca Hallstedt



Photo by Barbara Driscoll



Photo by Barbara Driscoll

Purple Martin (*Progne subis*) con't.

mosquito spraying, and assistance with nesting boxes. Monitoring existing nests to ensure that Starlings or House sparrows don't move in first. Reduction of pesticide use on their South American wintering grounds and protection of large winter roosts in Brazil is also important to the conservation of this species.

Install and actively manage safe housing in suitable habitat. Learn more about suitable habitat, equipment, and management techniques from the [Purple Martin Conservation Association](#). Consider engaging a public park, school, library or place of worship in installing and monitoring housing for nesting purple martins.

Take steps to live sustainably and mitigate climate change. Purple Martins are also sensitive to cold snaps; bad weather kills more birds than all other sources of mortality combined. When unseasonably cold temperatures last more than three or four days, the birds starve for lack of insects. More frequent unpredictable weather, especially during the breeding season, may have significant impacts on Purple Martins and other nesting aerial insectivores.

Volunteer to monitor nesting purple martins with New Hope Bird Alliance. New Hope Bird Alliance has installed and monitors nesting gourds and other houses for Purple Martins at several locations:

- Durham: Patterson Place Shopping Area (Behind the Pet Smart in an open field next to a man-made wetlands area); and Sandy Creek Park.
- Blackwood Farms Park in Orange County
- Crosswinds Campground – Jordan Lake State Recreation Area – Chatham County

In 2023, NHBA helped to band 50 chicks at the Patterson Place location. Unfortunately, in 2024 poor weather conditions impacted the chicks at that location and half the chicks starved. If you are interested in helping to monitor any of these four locations, please contact newhopebird@gmail.com. We have training and assistance with monitoring at locations which is done by teams.



Photo by Barbara Driscoll



Gourd house installation at Blackwood Farm Park. Photo by Barbara Driscoll

For additional information on Purple Martins: [Purple Martin Conservation Association](#) supports the study of the Purple Martin and provides information on its website.