

Purple Martin

Progne subis

Putting up a Purple Martin house is like installing a miniature neighborhood in your backyard. In the East, dark, glossy-blue males and brown females will peer from the entrances and chirp from the rooftops all summer. In the West, martins mainly still nest the old-fashioned way—in woodpecker holes. Our largest swallows, Purple Martins perform aerial acrobatics to snap up flying insects. At the end of the breeding season they gather in big flocks and make their way to South America.

Keys to Identification

Size and Shape

Purple Martins are very large, broad-chested swallows. They have stout, slightly hooked bills, short, forked tails, and long, tapered wings.

Color Pattern

Adult males are iridescent, dark blue-purple overall with brown-black wings and tail. Females and immatures are duller, with variable amounts of gray on the head and chest and a whitish lower belly.

Behavior

Purple Martins fly rapidly with a mix of flapping and gliding. They feed in midair, catching large, aerial insects such as dragonflies. Martins feed and roost in flocks, often mixed with other species of swallows. They often feed higher in the air than other swallows, which can make them tough to spot.

Habitat

Purple Martins are colonial, with dozens of martins nesting in the same spot; they feed in open areas, especially near water. In the East they nest almost exclusively in nest boxes and martin houses; in the West you'll find them nesting in natural cavities.

Cool Facts

Putting up martin houses used to be so common that John James Audubon used them to choose his lodgings for the night. In 1831, he remarked, "Almost every country tavern has a martin box on the upper part of its sign-board; and I have observed that the handsomer the box, the better does the inn generally prove to be."



Measurements

Both Sexes

- Length - 7.5 - 7.9 inches
- Wingspan - 15.4 - 16.1 inches
- Weight - 1.6 - 2.1 ounces