

## Birds and Butterflies, A Report

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The purple martins have left their houses and are on their way to their South American winter homes, or at least they are at the assembly points getting ready for the big trip. It is a good time to lower the martin houses to discourage further nesting by English sparrows. Put the houses up again, on or about March 1, to welcome the returning purple martins.

In my neighborhood the purple martins heading south coincides with the build-up of the butterfly and dragonfly populations. I can't say for sure that there is a direct relationship between the two events, but it seems reasonable. Even a few Monarchs have showed up to take advantage of the nectar available from the milkweed, mistflower, porterweed, and zinnias. The salvias and lantanas are showing lots of blooms but so far are not as attractive to the Monarchs, Queens, Gulf Fritillaries, Giant Swallowtails, and Black Swallowtails.

If you used Dreamland zinnia hybrids for your cut flower or butterfly garden this spring, they are probably declining now and can be pulled. Replace them with new Dreamland transplants, or plant seed for California Giants, Cactus, or another of the large zinnias. Another strategy that works is to let the Dreamlands reseed. Collect the browning flower heads from the plants you are going to remove and spread the seed over the now bare bed. If you wet the soil every day for a week, the seeds will readily germinate and be blooming in 4 more weeks. Don't expect the blooms to be as full, dense and colorful as the original Dreamlands, the parent material that will grow from the seed will include tall, short, and irregular shaped blooms. The one sure result will be that the blooms will be very attractive to the butterflies as a nectar source. Zinnias last until the cold weather arrives, usually after Thanksgiving.

The seed eating birds like the zinnia seeds but in many landscapes and fields the lesser goldfinches, Inca doves, cardinals and other seed eaters are targeting the sunflower patches. Sunflowers meet the needs of butterflies for nectar, are a favorite egg-laying site for the Bordered Patch butterfly, but most noticeably they are a favorite seed source that probably will continue providing seed for another month. On October 1, about the time my sunflower patches are cleared of seed, I begin providing seeds (thistle, sunflower, safflower, and mixed seed) in bird feeders. The timing works well.

Water is one of the easiest ways to attract birds to your landscape especially when it has been as hot and dry as it has this summer. If you keep the bird bath full expect at least 8 or 9 different species of birds to drink and bathe every day. Place the bird bath in the open at least 6 feet from bushes or other cover that cats could use to launch an attack. Hawks will cruise through but if there is cover 6 or 8 feet away most of the bathing birds will escape. Include more than one bird bath or a drip mechanism and the bird bath water source will be even more popular.

Next month we will see the first of the migrating hummingbirds move through San Antonio. Expect lots of action from migrating black-chins, ruby throats, and rufous hummingbirds if you have nectar sources like zinnias, cape honeysuckle, porter weed, and flame acanthus. Bring the birds on the patio for observation with sugar water feeders and firebush(sun) and penta (shade) in containers.