

Purple Martins Are Looking for Housing

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Landlords with housing for purple martins are reporting visits by small groups of the interesting birds. We used to call these small groups “scouts” and credited them with scoping out the housing options for larger groups of their tribe to follow. It is now recognized that the earliest visitors to an area are looking to identify and claim the best apartments for themselves. Although some of the early visitors to your houses may just be resting on the way to their final destination, most are veterans of nesting or being raised in your houses in the past year. They have a fond vision of the available apartments and want to lay claim to the one they remember as the best.

If you have not raised your houses yet, it is probably best to do it now. If you are putting up a new house it is also good to get in place as quickly as possible because the nesting period is action packed and only lasts until July. Place new houses in locations where there are clear flight lanes from the wide-open spaces to the house. Purple martin houses placed in the middle of trees are usually not very successful at attracting tenants. Expert advice and classes about attracting purple martins can be obtained from sources such as Wild Birds Unlimited and the San Antonio Botanical Garden.

The disadvantage of raising the houses before the purple martins are ready to move in is that it gives the English sparrows and starlings a head start. Within hours after the entry holes are opened and the houses are put up, the English sparrows will start moving in. Some years I lower the houses and remove the English sparrow nests until the martins arrive to take possession of a share of the apartments. Other years I have let the two species do battle over the apartments. The usual result is that 3 to 4 of the apartments are used by each of the species in each house.

Sparrows and martins squabble but eventually share the house. Starlings are more fierce and will sometimes destroy a purple martin nest including killing the martin that attempts to defend it. I have found that the best I can do is to lower the house when the fight becomes obvious. Usually the purple martin will tolerate the intervention and the starling may leave.

The initial settling-in is always exciting, last year in addition to the problem with starlings, one of our neighborhood Coopers hawks launched several attacks on the houses and their residents over a three-day period. She seemed more interested in English sparrows as a food source, but I did not witness that she had any success harvesting them.

After competition for the housing and the predator’s visit, things settled down a bit in my yard, but the nesting period is always interesting. The purple martins noisily communicate with each other as they spend time collecting leaves, mud and sticks for the nests.

Feeding themselves is also an important part of settling in. If it is cold, they may have to cruise high and over long distances to find their main food dragon flies, moths, butterflies, bees and wasps. They will sometimes even harvest ants from the ground. What they don’t eat much of, despite our long-term belief to the contrary, is mosquitoes! Mosquitoes fly in the evening and stick close to foliage, so they apparently don’t cross paths with the feeding martins very often.

Despite their lack of consumption of mosquitos, attracting purple martins to your landscape is worth the effort.