

Wildlife Report

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We are in the middle of plant and wildlife transitions from cool to hot weather in San Antonio landscapes. Here is a report on some of the action.

The purple martins have moved into my neighborhood at Medical Center in record numbers (my records!).

The squabbles with the starlings continue but so far there has not been a "to the death battle" with a female martin trying to defend her apartment like last year. I may have blundered by having kept my suet offerings full at this point. The starlings are insect eaters that appreciate the pepper flavored suet bars just as much as the orange-crowned warblers, Bewick's wrens, Carolina wrens, downy woodpeckers, golden fronted woodpeckers, ladder-backed woodpeckers, and kinglets. Now with the martins landing on the ground and on the house roof for nesting materials, their paths keep crossing those of the starlings flying low to visit the suet blocks, resulting in skirmishes.

There are record numbers of purple martins nesting in the neighborhood but instead of the new nesters taking space in the new houses available, they chose instead to compete with the sparrows for available apartments in the five older houses. The favorite house has 6 pairs of nesters while two one-year-old attractive (to my eyes) houses do not have any martins! I have not given up yet, there is a chance that some martins seeking nest sites may still show up in May.

The breeding black-chinned hummingbirds have returned. A few individuals are visiting the sugar water feeders along with blue curl, zinnias, larkspur, Mexican honeysuckle, and salvia blooms.

I did not see any ruby-throat hummingbirds this spring but there is lots of honeybee action. With the help of the golden fronted woodpeckers that pull off the bee guards, the bees were covering the feeders with many individuals making suicidal penetrations into the sugar water reservoir. I want the bees to have access to the sugar water, but I do not want them to be killed in the process. I solved the problem by switching all my hummingbird feeders to the A-1 Best brand. They are manufactured in Poteet and sold by HEB, Wild Birds Unlimited, and other retailers. The bee guards on the A-1 Best can not be removed by the woodpeckers. In addition to obtaining some sugar water by sharing access with the hummingbirds from the feeder, I pour any leftover sugar water every week when I rinse and refill the feeders into shallow dishes for the bees and butterflies.

There were Monarchs that visited landscapes this spring, but not as much action as I expected. It may be that part of the issue is that my milkweeds have been slow to sprout. I hope it is not a general problem of more decline of the Monarch population. The good news is that other gardeners have reported that both their tropical milkweed and the native milkweeds produced enough foliage that they had Monarch's lay eggs and produce caterpillars.

One tactic that some gardeners are using is to purchase large tropical milkweed plants now from their favorite nursery so the needed foliage will be in place for the Monarch and Queen butterfly egg-laying as the migrating generation moves into the San Antonio area.

Other butterflies that are evident are the black swallowtails, sulfurs, gulf fritillaries, whites, bordered patches, painted ladies, American ladies, red admirals, greystreaks, checkerspot, and buckeyes.

The mistflower is blooming now. Along with zinnia, tropical milkweed, blue curl, and porter weed, mistflower is on my favorite nectar source list. Obtain it as a transplant from area nurseries. Another spectacular butterfly plant is annual sunflower. Find seeds on the nursery seed rack or from a fellow gardener. Plant them now in full sun.

If your neighborhood has deer along with butterflies make a point to watch for the deer browsing on the horse herb, the black swallowtails are also harvesting nectar from the small yellow blooms. If you do not have horse herb you can sometimes find it sold as a ground cover at nurseries. The other option is to dig up some of the hardy lawn weed out of a lawn on poor soil. Horse herb is a perennial that also produces seed but so far efforts to collect the seed have not been successful.