

Birds and Butterflies

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It is another key time in our landscapes for birds and butterflies.

The purple martin young are emerging from their apartment nests. Unfortunately, some will fall to the ground. You can try to place them back in the nest, but it seems inevitable that a few will be too weak to fly and will become food for predators such as cats and raccoons. Some emerging young will be harassed by unmated martins called floaters that are part of most martin colonies. There will be lots of noise and squabbling but most of the young will successfully fly off to join their siblings and parents at close, but out of sight roosts to receive food and instruction and then return to their nest for the night for several days, before they eventually join with large flocks that leave in July for South America

In past years I have been inclined to lower my martin houses and shut the entry holes to eliminate any expansion of the English sparrow nesting after the martins leave for the South, but Bill and Kyle at Wildbirds Unlimited have convinced me that shutting down too early may discourage the unattached and young of the year martins that wander around after the nesting period from identifying the existing martin houses as available for next years residency. The end of July may be a good time to lower and clean the houses.

If you feed the hummingbirds, you probably have noticed that there are more individuals visiting your feeders now. You will also detect more of a relaxed attitude between the feeding birds. This is because the main nesting period is over and the adults are less territorial, plus the young of the year are also enjoying the sugar water.

If you have not been feeding the hummingbirds and want to start, obtain a feeder from your favorite wild bird, pet, feed, or HEB store. I like the BEST1 Brand because they are manufactured in Poteet and they are easy to use. You want a feeder that can be rinsed out and easily refilled every week. The BEST 1 also has its bee guards built into the feeder holes to prevent suicidal entry by the bees and excessive utilization of the sugar water by the golden-fronted woodpeckers.

Mix the sugar water at the dilution rate of one-part sugar to four parts water by volume. It can be mixed and stored in one-gallon plastic jugs kept in the refrigerator. It is important to replace the remaining solution in the feeder at the end of every week, but the old sugar water does not go to waste because it can be offered in shallow dishes to the bees and butterflies.

The hummingbirds also respond to tubular nectar producing plants such as firebush or porter weed. Plant a firebush or porter weed in a container in full sun on your patio to bring the resident black-chinned hummingbirds in for close observation this summer and the migrating ruby throats and rufous hummingbirds in the fall. If your patio is in the shade, pentas work nearly as well to attract the interesting visitors.

I do not know if it is a coincidence but about the same time as the purple martins leave their nests for assembly points along the trail to South America, the butterfly populations seem to grow in San Antonio.

It is now recognized that purple martins eat more dragon flies and butterflies than mosquitoes! If you have zinnias, mistflowers, milkweed, lantana, salvia, durata, sunflower, and porter weed for nectar plus milkweed, passion vine, citrus, esperanza, dill, parsley, flame acanthus, canna, or ruellia for nesting sites expect queens, gulf fritillary, black swallowtail, giant swallowtail, painted lady, and other butterfly species to visit and produce caterpillars in your landscape.