



TRAVIS  
AUDUBON  
*Listen. Look. And Learn.*

# PURPLE MARTINS



## MIGRATION & RANGE

Purple Martins are the largest swallow in North America. They spend our winter in South America and their spring and summer in North America where they breed – this is why we call them *Neotropical Migrants*.

Austin is located along one of three different flyways they use to travel to and from South America. One study, found that a female Martin returned from the Amazon to Pennsylvania in just 13 days, flying an average of 358 miles per day! That’s an amazing feat of stamina.

For thousands of years, Martins have nested in natural cavities and dead trees. However, over time, Native Americans learned to hang gourds with holes cut in their sides so the Martins would nest near their villages. This arrangement benefitted both humans and birds.

Martins acted like scarecrows chasing crows from corn patches and vultures from drying meat and animal hides, while humans discouraged predators from raiding Martin nests.

Today, east of the Rocky Mountains, Martins nest nearly exclusively in human-supplied housing.

## DESCRIPTION

- Males are dark, glossy, blue-purple.
- Females have duller upperparts and mostly gray underparts.
- Length nearly 8 inches.
- Wingspan 15.4 - 16.1 inches.

## COOL FACTS

Martins eat and drink in flight. They capture insects on the wing and skim water surfaces to scoop up water with their lower bills.

## NESTING COLONIES

Martins nest in open spaces near human settlements where nest houses are provided, and especially near water and large open spaces. Over time, they have come to associate human activity with safety. In the southern U.S., they favor white or light colored housing because white reflects the heat of the sun, keeping nestlings cooler. Many individuals and neighborhood groups maintain Martin colonies in Austin. One of the largest is at Hornsby Bend. **To learn how to manage a colony, or start your own, visit the Purple Martin Conservation Association: [www.purplemartin.org](http://www.purplemartin.org)**



## MARTIN ROOSTS

Martins are very social. After babies fledge, or acquire the necessary feathers to fly, the birds move from the nesting colony to large, communal roosts. They sleep at the roosts during migration.

Austin has a major roosting site near the Austin Community College Highland Campus and I-35, where hundreds of thousands of birds gather each summer beginning in mid to late June through early August. This roost site, in an open urban setting, provides safety from predators. Once established, Martins use a roost for many years.

## CONSERVATION

Some Martin populations are undergoing long-term decline but they are not listed as threatened or endangered.

Migratory and wintering roosts are critically important to the survival of Martins.

Urban/suburban tree roosts are sometimes seen as a nuisance to cities or owners of private property. To ensure their survival, Martin roosts need recognition and protection.

## HOW YOU CAN HELP

- Become a Member of Travis Audubon by calling 512.300-BIRD!
- Bring your family, friends, neighbors, and co-workers to see the roost.
- Keep your cat indoors. Free-roaming cats eat birds and other wildlife.

For more information go to [www.Travisaudubon.org](http://www.Travisaudubon.org) or The Purple Martin Conservation Association at [www.purplemartin.org](http://www.purplemartin.org)

Images courtesy of Greg Lavaty, PUMA, and via Flickr Creative Commons Ann Harkness, Let Ideas Compete and Andy Balinsky.



3710 Cedar Street, Box 5  
Austin, TX 78705  
512-300-BIRD

