

Information below is adapted from the Maine NRCS 'Structures for Wildlife Job Sheet'.

DESCRIPTION & HABITAT

Purple Martins are the largest member of the swallow family. Male martins are dark metallic blue with purple iridescence. The females are blue-brown with a buff-colored belly. Both sexes have notched tails that are characteristic of swallows. They return to the same nest area each year. Their nests are made in cavities of twigs, weeds, dead leaves and grasses.

Martins prefer to nest in large open areas near water, such as fields, pastures and golf courses. The diet of the purple martin consists of flying large insects such as beetles, moths and dragonflies.

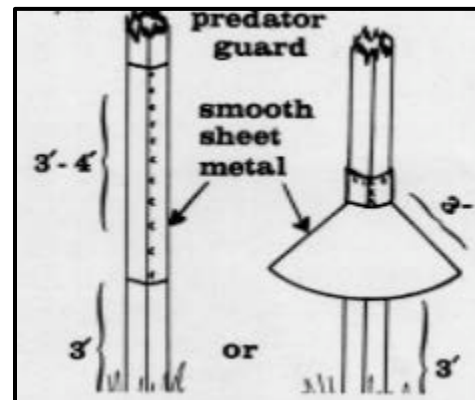


NEST BOXES

A shortage of natural nest sites in eastern North America due to competitive exclusion of martins from suitable tree cavities by introduced bird species (i.e., European starlings, house sparrows), have resulted in purple martins becoming almost totally dependent on man-made housing. Once martins nest at your site, they will come back every year, if you manage the site properly. Martins are colonial birds, so apartment style houses are usually best. Martins have very specific aerial requirements. The house will have the greatest success in attracting birds if it is placed in an open area 12-18 feet above ground at least 40 feet away from trees and 30-120 feet from human housing. No more than one house per acre is ideal. Locations near ponds or lakes are ideal.

The dimensions for each compartment floor should measure 6" x 6" but larger compartments (7"x12") offer greater protection from predators and elements. Gourd style houses should be at least 8" diameter but preferably 10-12" range. For some designs (see next page) a center compartment is for air ventilation. Drill small holes in the interior compartment walls and exterior walls of the roof to provide good air circulation. Entrance holes should be 2 1/8" in diameter and 1" above the floor of compartment. Starling-resistant entrance holes* (1-3/16" tall x 2-3/4" to 3" wide) should be placed so the bottom of the entrance is flush with the compartment floor, or not more than 1/4" below it. Houses must be painted white to reflect heat and to help attract martins and repel nuisance species such as English sparrow and starlings. Paint only the outside of the house. A predator guard should be constructed to keep racoons and other predators. Place smooth sheet metal around the pole or attach a sheet metal cone to the pole (see illustration below right).

Martins will not nest if house sparrows or starlings are using some compartments. To prevent sparrows and starlings from nesting, take the houses down or close the house after the martins have left in the fall and then re-open when they arrive in spring. If house sparrows and European starlings do manage to nest, evict them and temporarily plug holes. These two species are not protected by the Migratory Bird Treaty Act (MBTA) so control measures may be warranted if they take up residence in the house. If native species (all protected under MBTA) such as tree swallows, bluebirds or house wrens try to nest in the house close it up (only if no eggs or nestlings) and offer alternative nest sites nearby.



Information used from Purple Martin Conservation Association <https://www.purplemartin.org/>
There are many available styles, plans and building and siting recommendations on the website.

Construction of a Purple Martin Nest Box

The diagram below is from the Cooperative Extension Service located at the University of Georgia.

