

*Purple martins majesty*

# Attract the pretty mosquito-eaters and keep them

By TERRY BUCHEN

With a mosquito-eating prowess that is legend, purple martins are the largest and probably most sought-after swallows on this continent. Yet they are difficult to attract, and although more than a million North Americans maintain housing for them, relatively few succeed in attracting breeding pairs.

While purple martins are not the mosquito-eating machines of lore, they are almost entirely fed by insects. They love larger flying bugs, such as dragon flies, mayflies and cicadas. For this reason, they are ideal inhabitants for golf courses.

Attract a mating pair of purple martins, and it will return year after year, annually laying four to six pure white eggs, which are

incubated for 14 to 16 days.

The 10 most common mistakes to avoid are:

1) Martin houses installed too close to tall trees or in yards that are too enclosed. Air space at bird house height should be void of trees in at least a couple of directions for 40 to 60 feet.

2) The landlord allows other birds to claim the housing first. If the bird house was not used by

breeding martins last year, they will be easily repelled from the entire housing complex. On the other hand, they seldom are intimidated for reoccupying the site they used the preceding year.

3) The bird housing is placed too far from human housing. Martins prefer to nest within 100 feet of people, where they have learned they are safer from predators (snakes, raccoons, opossums, hawks, crows and owls). The bird house should be in the center of the most open spot available, 30 to 100 feet from human housing.

4) The house is not painted white. Another "believe it or not" item, but white reflects the sun's heat, highlights the dark entrance holes and best enhances mating.

5) The bird house is opened up too early. Purple martins migrate, returning to south Texas by late January and the Canadian provinces by mid-April. The oldest arrive first and return to where they bred the preceding year. Last year's fledglings show up over the following eight to 12 weeks in the North, 12 to 16 weeks in the South, beginning four or five weeks after the "scouts."

6) Failure to open the martin housing early enough. This sounds like a "Catch 22" situation considering the preceding point. At unestablished sites, the birds have to see either the open entrance holes or other martins there.

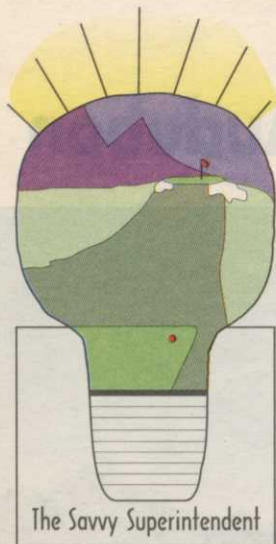
On the other hand, if breeding birds were there last year, superintendents can wait until they see martins standing on the house to open it up. Purple martins will return to the same breeding site year after year.

7) Vines or shrubs are allowed to grow up under the bird houses. Any such unestablished sites tend to be avoided by purple martins because they are more accessible to predators.

8) The houses not built to specifications. A compartment's floor dimensions must measure at least six inches by six inches. Seven-by-12 inches is far superior. The entrance hole should be about one inch above the floor and two to 2-1/4 inches in diameter. Most martins nest in the houses of gourds in the East and Midwest, but in tree or cactus cavities in the West.

9) The house is attached to, or too close to, wires. Martins know instinctively that squirrels can gain access to a bird house.

10) The house cannot be easily lowered and cleaned. Superintendents need to vertically lower their housing often to evict nest-site competitors and check on martin nestlings. Any such disturbances will not cause martins to leave their nest or site. Poorly maintained housing promotes parasites, as well as starlings and house sparrows that compete with martins for nest sites.



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