

Purple Martin Condominiums

By David W. Bradshaw

Purple martins are some of the most beneficial songbirds in the United States. Members of the swallow family, they are very graceful fliers and catch their food on the wing. Therefore, their diet consists almost entirely of small flying insects. Purple martins are migratory birds, arriving in South Carolina to claim nesting sites as early as mid-February. (The earliest date I have recorded my first arrivals was on February 9th, but they continue to arrive throughout March and April.) Purple martins overwinter in the tropical rainforests of Central and South America. As the rainforests continue to diminish through extensive logging operations, purple martin populations nesting in the United States have also declined nationally. Providing suitable nesting sites in South Carolina can delay, and possibly reverse, this decline in the purple martin population.

Purple martins are gregarious and prefer to nest in large colonies near human habitation in open areas well away from trees. I have two colony poles with a total of 48 gourd houses. Most years I will have between 30 and 40 pairs of martins nesting near my vegetable garden. With most pairs fledging from 4-7 young, there are often more than 200 birds flying around my garden catching insects before they eventually migrate south in late July and early August. Throughout the nesting season the clear metallic and musical songs are welcomed every daylight hour. An additional benefit of having purple martins is that they are vigilant sentries who guard against hawks and crows, chasing them from the vicinity of the colony.

Purple martins drink water while on the wing, skimming over lakes to scoop up water. Therefore, the colony will enjoy a greater chance of success if placed within ¼ mile of an impoundment. I have even seen colonies attached to boat docks where the birds seem not to be disturbed by frequent boating activity.

Condominium Construction Details

Outlined below are brief details of refinements I have made on my own colonies over the 35 years I have enjoyed attracting purple martins.

The base pole and upright are of 2-2 1/2 inch galvanized pipe but lighter, strong materials can be used also. Crossbars are 1 1/4 inch galvanized pipe or conduit with 1/8 inch I-bolts drilled through and firmly attached with nuts and lock washers. I drilled holes through the upright, inserted crossbars, and welded them into place for stability. Metal shower curtain hooks are used to attach gourds to the I-bolts securely. The hooks can then be snapped off in minutes for cleaning and winter storage in a dry place. Each spring I reattach the gourds and apply a new coat of exterior latex paint (either white or tinted a light adobe gourd-color brown). When stored and painted annually, gourds may last 5-6 years.

Birdhouse gourds can be grown in almost any soil in full sunlight, but respond well to added organic matter and moderate water. Plant seeds in early summer after the soil is warm. Gourds grow rampantly with vines 20-30 feet long. They readily trellis up chain link fences without help nor attention. When gourds are mature and dry, they are naturally hollow and lightweight. A 2 1/2 inch hole should be cut 1 1/2 inch above the floor using a hole saw attachment on a hand held electric drill (or this can be accomplished manually with a sharp pocket knife.) Remove all seeds and papery husks from the interior. Several ¼ inch drainage holes should be drilled in the bottom of each gourd. Small holes near the top of the neck should be drilled to insert the shower curtain hook. Now the new birdhouse is ready to be sanded free of flaking skin and mold before painting.

