

How to Attract Purple Martins

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Use decoys to attract purple martins.

Rick Kimpel

Purple martins are large, iridescent swallows and highly desirable backyard birds, and attracting purple martins can be easy. Because they eat thousands of insects each day, do not require birdfeeders and can nest in compact colonies, birders only have to take a few steps to make their backyard suitable as purple martin habitat.

What Purple Martins Need

Like all birds, purple martins require four things for a suitable habitat: food, water, shelter and nesting sites. By creating a bird-friendly habitat with these swallows in mind, attracting purple martins can be simple.

Food

Purple martins eat flying insects, so no number of birdfeeders or [type of birdseed](#) will attract them. Instead, backyard birders should avoid spraying insecticides or pesticides on lawns, trees or shrubs, since doing so will eliminate the single food source these birds require. Instead, by attracting purple martins you can take advantage of their natural insect control and voracious appetites.

On rare occasions, purple martins will eat fine gravel to use as grit to aid their digestion. Having a secluded source of this gravel nearby can help attract the birds. Furthermore, they will also eat crushed eggshells as a calcium supplement during the nesting season, and providing the eggshells (dried and briefly toasted to be sterile and brittle) can encourage nesting purple martins to linger nearby.

Water

All birds require some source of water, and purple martins prefer large, natural water sources instead of [birdbaths](#). A large, long pond, lake or stream is the best source, since these birds drink in flight by scooping their bills into the water as they pass by. If a backyard birder has the room to put in a large water feature, choose an elongated design that gives purple martins adequate room for this fly-by drinking. Otherwise, it is easiest to attract purple martins if there are nearby natural water sources.

Shelter

Purple martins take shelter almost exclusively in artificial houses, and they will avoid brush piles and dense plantings for fear of lurking predators. Unlike many other birds, it is best to attract purple martins to open areas with little excessive shelter, as the birds will be more secure when they have a good visual range to survey.

Nesting Sites

Putting up appropriate [purple martin houses](#) is the best way to attract these birds. They are colonial nesters and large birdhouses with multiple compartments are best to meet their needs. The birds will be naturally attracted to homes painted white, which also reflect heat better and keep nestlings cooler. Both apartment-style houses and gourd houses are available, and creating clusters of houses will encourage large colonies of the birds to nest. Birdhouses for purple martins must be placed 30-120 feet away from large trees and other structures, as this will give them plenty of space for feeding.

In addition to providing appropriate houses for purple martins, supplying proper [nesting materials](#) can help encourage them to take up residence. A nearby pile of small twigs, grass clippings and leaves is perfect, and a muddy area is also useful as these birds use mud as a binder to hold their nests together.