

## **The Purple Martins of Puget Sound**

The Purple Martin is North America's largest swallow. It is present in the Puget Sound for approximately four months, May through August. The specie winters mostly in Southern Brazil, where it mingles with two very similar specie for about six months. Migration, up to 6,000 miles and one of the longest of any terrestrial bird species, consumes the remainder of the calendar year.

In 1975, the status of the Purple Martin in the Pacific Northwest was grim. Once an abundant species in Western Washington, their well known nesting sites along the Puget Sound shorelines had become widely scattered. Each spring brought fewer and fewer birds to the Northwest. A few individuals decided to pool their knowledge and begin a series of efforts to reestablish the Purple Martins. Their efforts have proven successful.

One effort was to devise an acceptable "artificial cavity" to assist in the transition from natural habitat to human developed habitat. A design that allowed light would discourage other bird species not tolerant or indifferent to light from nesting in the Purple Martin boxes. The white paint is a necessary component of the birdbox. In Purple Martin boxes, heat buildup will occur if sunlight is absorbed. No matter what design is used for the house, white is the only acceptable color for martin housing. A white exterior reflects sunlight and heat, while a dark one absorbs it. On a cloudless day a dark martin house will heat to a deadly temperature.

A single unit house is used as opposed to a house with multi-units because of the western Purple Martin's highly territorial behaviors. A male Martin will fight off other species within a close proximity to its area. It is acceptable to put bird boxes in close proximity of each other as seen on the pilings in East Bay. The key is to provide individual compartments for the Purple Martin's nests.

Efforts continue in the City of Olympia to reestablish the Purple Martin species. Thanks to the efforts of Jack and Ada Davis, Purple Martins have become well established in a number of local locations including Fiddlehead Marina and the Nisqually National Wildlife Refuge. Since then, numerous local groups and volunteers have been working cooperatively with Stream Team to provide habitat for these birds in East Bay. In recent years, Marshall Middle School, South Sound GREEN, Trout Unlimited, the Port of Olympia, Cynthia Scheller and Cub Scout Troop Den 6 Pack 116, Don Eveleth, and Capital High School (Ed Thietje's class) have all made suitable houses for the Purple Martins or helped to install the bird boxes at East Bay. Most of these boxes have been installed on pilings near Tom's Outboard Motor by Don Eveleth and Randy Black, a Trout Unlimited volunteer. Other boxes may be installed on the Evergreen State College's campus and at a Department of Natural Resources facility at Woodard Bay in the fall of 1998.

Citizens are encouraged to install their own houses for the Purple Martins but should understand the commitment and responsibility in doing so. The Purple Martin is a bird that flourishes around humans. Citizens installing Purple Martin bird boxes need to regularly maintain the boxes. The birds are not great housekeepers and will continue building one nest on top of another, unless the boxes are cleaned. Poor maintenance will result in disease and low occupancy of the bird boxes. The responsibility of becoming a Purple Martin "landlord" requires dedication but the rewards of establishing a good colony of Purple Martins are numerous.