

The Purple Martin



To attract martins, place aluminum houses in unobstructed areas.

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AS INFLATION and energy crises worsen, as EPA restrictions regulate our every move, and as that projected budget increase in reality turns into a budget cut, an escape is sought to maintain some degree of sanity. At Marshfield Country Club, located on the South Shore of Massachusetts, an effort to relieve some pressure of these problems yielded unexpected and delightful results.

A program of insect control was undertaken, one slightly different in approach. In effect, the program is better, safer, and a far more pleasant way to combat flying insects than the constant fogging of chemicals that envelopes everything in its wake, including humans. How is this possible? The answer, *Progne subis subis*, of course.

The purple martin, *Progne subis subis*, is the largest member of the swal-

low family. They are migratory birds whose range is one of the widest of all native North American species. The martins spend each spring and summer nesting throughout most of the United States and Southern Canada, and during the winter, they concentrate in the Amazon Valley region of Brazil. During their winter stay, the martins' behavior is unlike that of other birds. They never nest; rather they spend all their time free-flying in the tropical jungle air. Then, sensing the arrival of spring, they return to North America. Martins are very punctual; their arrival can be predicted accurately. An interesting characteristic, proven by bird banders' tests, is that the martin returns to the same house from which it departed in the fall. So, if a colony becomes established, the chances for having them back in succeeding years are good, depending upon such obstacles as severe weather and a scarcity of food during the return flight.

Martins effect a natural insect control program because of their amazing capacity to consume mosquitoes, flies and other flying insects. Experts estimate that one bird can consume two thousand mosquitoes a day, which it instantly snares by means of a sticky oral substance as it darts through swarms of insects in flight. The martin traps flies and mosquitoes, and compresses them into a pellet for its own nourishment or to feed its young. The mosquito's period of greatest activity is just before dusk, and that is when the martin is busiest.

THROUGHOUT HISTORY, the martin has been a friend of man. Indians encouraged the birds to nest in their villages by hanging hollow gourds from poles as birdhouses. The martins were treasured for their appetite for flying insects, keeping villages free of mosquitoes, and for their ability to drive hawks and crows from barnyards

and homesteads. But, rapid development and poor land-use planning has all but devastated the natural habitats of the martin, causing a serious decline in numbers.

Recently, though, efforts have been made to increase the population of this beneficial bird.

In order to attract martins, precise attention must be taken to select the right location and to build a proper house to attract them.

The ideal spot for establishing a purple martin colony is an area where there are no obstructions, allowing air space for them to dart and swoop. Another prerequisite for establishing a colony is to locate the houses in areas likely to be heavily infested with insects (i.e., ponds, low-lying swamp areas). The martins also love to perch on wires.

They like to inhabit man-made houses, and because of their affection for humans, their presence can be cultivated around areas where there is a considerable human activity. Golf courses fit this bill nicely. The martin is an attractive bird, with long and strong blue-black feathers, which, when folded,

reach over its short, forked tail. They are skillful and graceful in flight, providing hours of pleasure for bird-watchers.

With the increasing interest in the martin, methods have been developed to provide the most efficient housing possible. This comes in the form of aluminum apartment complexes, ranging anywhere from an established effective minimum of six compartments to the duplex models sporting over one hundred. Wooden houses are not satisfactory because they encourage mites that plague the birds and kill their young. They are also hot. Other obstacles to the martin are the sparrows and the starlings, which are North American inhabitants year-round, and therefore have first choice of housing in the spring. They love the wooden-type houses. Aluminum houses are cool and clean, and starlings don't like them. Sparrows can be discouraged from moving in before spring by plugging the apartment openings with specially designed covers. Also, innovative telescopic poles are available that permit the house to be lowered to evict the sparrows. Other deterrents involve hanging a

loud-playing transistor radio from the birdhouse. Martins love the music, sparrows flee from it.

NOW THAT A location devoid of obstruction is selected in mosquito-infested territory, and an aluminum house has been erected, the anxious wait begins. It often takes two to three years before the martins decide to move in. A close check on these prerequisites is essential. Each is important to the success of attracting martins to any site. Once the martins establish a colony, their homing instinct is so strong that they return year after year. The first sign of purple martin activity is the arrival of a scout, an older male, whose job is to determine the existing food supply and housing for the rest of the flock. If he likes what he sees, the new tenants will move in to stay until the fall when they once again depart for Brazil.

The purple martin is now a permanent attraction at the Marshfield Country Club. They provide an efficient, natural means of insect control that has proven to be an effective and satisfying experience for all privileged to observe their work and graceful flight.

Purple martin at work is a graceful performer.

