



Purple Martins in Santa Barbara, California: *Back to Nature*

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Out west Purple Martins still do things the old-fashioned way - instead of nesting in manmade houses, they use natural cavities in trees to get the job done.

Throughout the western United States, the population of Purple Martins has been in sharp decline over the past few decades due to habitat loss, competition from invasive species, and increased pesticide use. There are relatively few active breeding colonies remaining.

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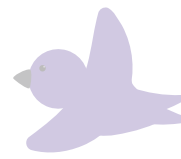
in natural cavities in Western Sycamore trees. Eager to learn more about it, I spoke with members of the local birding community. It became apparent that nobody really knew much about the breeding habits of our local Purple Martins. So, with the help of friend and fellow birder Adrian O’Loughlen and the support of our local Audubon Society, we set out to observe and learn what we could about the breeding habits and success rate of “our” Purple Martins.

Since the beginning of the 2016 breeding season, we have endeavored to visit the colony at least weekly

between April and August. Over the years Adrian has done the majority of the observing. As we are dealing with birds in a natural environment instead of manufactured housing structures that allow for cameras and inspections, it has taken several years of observation for us to arrive at some level of understanding about the breeding habits of these Purple Martins. Although after seven years we know a great deal more than we did, there is still much for us to learn about these fascinating birds.

The Purple Martins typically arrive in the area around mid-March. They

are neither quiet nor shy, so it is easy to tell when they are present. After arriving in the area, the Purple Martins spend several weeks endlessly and loudly investigating cavities in the trees, apparently looking for just the right spot to build a nest. We don’t understand exactly what makes the perfect cavity in the mind of a Purple Martin, and they do seem to change their minds. There have been numerous instances where we are certain that a pair has settled on a cavity and commenced building a nest, only to find the cavity quiet on our next visit and it then



remains empty for the remainder of the season.

Towards the middle of May things begin to quiet down around the colony. The pairs have finally made their cavity selections and commence breeding. We see the Purple Martins gathering nesting material, typically dried grasses and twigs from the ground as well as green leaves from nearby oak trees. By this time, we have a pretty good idea of which cavities are actually occupied, although there is usually a surprise nest or two that becomes apparent only towards the end of the season.

Around early June we begin to see the actual evidence of breeding – food deliveries to and removal of fecal sacs from the cavities. If we are lucky, we get to see young birds appearing at the cavity mouths in the last week or so before they fledge. It is not always easy to see into the cavities, and sometimes the small size of the opening only allows one chick at a time to get a view of the outside world. Because of this it is difficult for us to get an accurate count of the year's fledglings.

Seeing the young birds appear at the cavity mouth is definitely the highlight of the breeding season for

me. Anticipation builds as we wait to see the young birds make the leap out of the cavity mouth and into the world of flight. As the young birds cling to the mouth of the cavity they will often be encouraged to emerge by other members of the colony. Both adults and recently fledged birds will fly and hover close to the cavity mouth while chattering loudly, seemingly urging the young birds to come out and join them.

After fledging is complete the adults and young birds tend to remain around the colony for a few weeks to prepare for the long round-trip journey to their wintering grounds in South America. Typically by mid-August the Purple Martins, along with their chattering vocalizations, have departed for the year.

Over the years the number of successful nests in our colony has declined. In addition to the local pressures of ongoing drought, competition from European Starlings, and habitat loss, these birds face numerous hazards on their round-trip journey to South America every year.

In our area there is competition for nesting cavities from a healthy population of European Starlings, although thankfully House Sparrows are absent. This competition may or may not be impacting the breeding success of the Purple Martins. The starlings begin their breeding activities earlier than the Purple Martins and in our years of observation we have only noticed one direct confrontation between Purple Martins and European Starlings at a nesting cavity. There seems to be enough cavities to go around, but competition may be forcing the Purple Martins to choose cavities that are not ideal for them.

Habitat loss in the immediate area has also been a problem since we began our monitoring

program. Dead limbs from mature Sycamore trees located within the park tend to be removed due to safety concerns. Perhaps because of this we no longer find martins nesting in the central portion of the park. In another instance an important nesting tree was severely cut back due to its proximity to power lines, removing several cavities that previously hosted successful Purple Martin nests. Additionally, the park has also aggressively removed new growth from around the base of the mature trees which prevents the development of new nesting sites for the birds.

In spite of these challenges we hope the colony will persist and eagerly await the arrival of spring and the return of “our” Purple Martins for another breeding season. ➔



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Adrian O'Loughlin



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