



Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program

www.mass.gov/nhesp

Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

Purple Martin *Progne subis*

State Status: **None**
Federal Status: **None**

SPECIES DESCRIPTION: The Purple Martin is the largest of the North American swallows. The adult male is a glossy blue-black color, and females are blue-black above and lighter gray-brown below. The female is further distinguished by a gray collar and forehead. Juveniles resemble the female with less blue-black above. Martins forage for insects on the wing, often at higher altitudes than other swallows. Purple Martins are a cavity-nesting bird that often forms breeding colonies.

DISTRIBUTION AND ABUNDANCE: Purple Martins breed from central Alberta southeastward through Ontario, southern Quebec, and northwest Nova Scotia, running south through the United States primarily east of the 102nd parallel and as far south as the Gulf Coast and southern Florida. They are also found in the mountains of New Mexico, southern and northwest Arizona, western Colorado, north central Utah, and along the eastern slopes of the Cascade Mountains of California and western Mexico. Populations are at risk in California due to human activity and competition with starlings. However, populations often rebound in areas where nesting structures are provided. Martins have declined in Massachusetts, but they have strongholds in coastal areas in the northeast and southeast regions of the state. Purple Martins are a long-distance migrant with a large wintering range spanning 7 countries in South America including Bolivia and Brazil.

HABITAT DESCRIPTION: Martins traditionally inhabited forest edge or beaver flowages where woodpeckers have bored holes into dead snags. Although Purple Martins can still be found using natural cavities in the western United States, in the east they are now dependent on human-maintained nesting structures like gourds or houses.



Photo by Dick Daniels.

THREATS: Lack of adequate nest cavities, particularly in western North America, has resulted in a limited population size. In eastern North America, human-supplied nest sites seem to adequately supplement Purple Martin populations. That said, reliance on human intervention for nest sites creates a situation that is not ideal to sustain such a small and somewhat isolated population, particularly because nest boxes may be more quickly occupied by House Sparrows and European Starlings, thus requiring more rigorous human intervention. Several days of continuous cool wet weather can be particularly hard on martins and may result in high mortality rates that can wipe out entire colonies.

A Species of Greatest Conservation Need in the Massachusetts State Wildlife Action Plan

Massachusetts Division of Fisheries & Wildlife

1 Rabbit Hill Rd., Westborough, MA; tel: 508-389-6300; fax: 508-389-7890; www.mass.gov/dfw

Please allow the Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program to continue to conserve the biodiversity of Massachusetts with a contribution for 'endangered wildlife conservation' on your state income tax form, as these donations comprise a significant portion of our operating budget.

www.mass.gov/nhesp

REFERENCES:

- Tarof, S., and C.R. Brown. 2013. Purple Martin (*Progne subis*), The Birds of North America Online (A. Poole, Ed.). Ithaca: Cornell Lab of Ornithology; Retrieved from the Birds of North America online.
- Veit, R., and W.R. Petersen. 1993. *Birds of Massachusetts*. Massachusetts Audubon Society, Lincoln, MA.
- Walsh, J., and W.R. Petersen. 2013. *Massachusetts Breeding Bird Atlas 2*. Massachusetts Audubon Society and Scott & Nix, Inc.

Prepared 2015

A Species of Greatest Conservation Need in the Massachusetts State Wildlife Action Plan

Please allow the Natural Heritage & Endangered Species Program to continue to conserve the biodiversity of Massachusetts with a contribution for 'endangered wildlife conservation' on your state income tax form, as these donations comprise a significant portion of our operating budget.

www.mass.gov/nhesp