

HOUSTON AUDUBON · VOLUNTEER RESOURCES

Purple Martin Watch Parties

Volunteer Training Packet

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1 Event Overview & Your Night

Purple Martin Watch Parties are free, family-friendly community events hosted by Houston Audubon each summer, sponsored by CenterPoint Energy. They're held in the Houston area from July through September, timed around the Purple Martin pre-migration roost season. Each evening, thousands of Purple Martins gather at communal roost trees to rest before continuing their journey to the Brazilian Amazon. Attendees come from all backgrounds: families with kids, seasoned birders, photographers, and curious first-timers.

YOUR ROLE AS A VOLUNTEER

You are an ambassador for both Houston Audubon and the birds themselves. You don't need to know everything! Curiosity, warmth, and a few solid facts go a long way. When in doubt, redirect to the educational materials on the tables or connect attendees with staff.

Arrival & Setup

Volunteers should arrive by 7:30 PM. The event typically runs until after the birds have fully settled, around 30–45 minutes after sunset.

- Unfold tables & lay out table linens/cloths**
Check with the staff lead on layout or reference the set-up photo inside the supply bin!

- Arrange display materials on tables**
Educational boards (Purple Martin Flight, Munchies, Nests, Migration, Species ID, Legend & History, Identifying Purple Martins), study skins, rack cards, and Houston Audubon info.

- Set out cooler with purple lemonade & cups**
Keep cups in an accessible stack. Replenish as needed throughout the evening.

- Prepare silhouette sticks for distribution**
Purple Martin silhouettes on dowel sticks. Keep in a container for easy grab-and-go. Offer to arriving and "tailgating" guests. They are great for photos, and kids love them!

- Locate & prepare crowd counting materials**
Tally counter or paper sheet. Confirm your two counting times with staff lead. Count adults and children separately; record the time of each count.

- Familiarize yourself with the display boards**
Skim the educational materials so you can point people toward relevant ones throughout the night.

STUDY SKINS NOTE

Study skins are actual preserved bird specimens. Please handle them with care and supervise children around them. They're a great conversation starter; visitors are often amazed to see the size and iridescence up close. You can point out the difference between adult male plumage (fully purple-black) vs. females and juveniles.

Evening Timeline

7:30 PM	Volunteer arrival. Set up tables, display materials, lemonade station, and silhouettes.
~8:00 PM	Welcome attendees, direct them to materials, begin distributing silhouettes. Staff may give a brief intro talk.
First Count	Complete your first crowd count (adults and children separately) at a time coordinated with your staff lead — typically early in the event window.
Before Sunset	Bird activity picks up as martins begin streaming in at high altitudes. Peak engagement time — encourage people to look up!
Second Count	Complete your second crowd count — typically at peak attendance, around or just after sunset.
~30 to 45 min After Sunset	Birds settle. Crowds thin. Begin gentle breakdown: consolidate materials, collect lemonade supplies.
Post-Event	Fold tables, consolidate linens, collect remaining silhouettes. Report crowd counts to staff lead.

Crowd Count Sheet

We count twice per event and track adults and children separately. This data supports program reporting to sponsors, including CenterPoint Energy.

COUNT	ADULTS	CHILDREN
Count #1 Time: _____		
Count #2 Time: _____		
Notes / Observations		Date:

2 Purple Martin Basics

7¹/₄–8¹/₂" Body length	1³/₄ oz Weight (≈ 1 slice of bread)
20 mph Avg. flying speed	5,000 mi Erie, PA → Manaus, Brazil

What Are They?

Purple Martins (*Progne subis*) are the largest swallow in North America. Adult males are striking. Their entire bodies are iridescent bluish-black with a purple sheen. Females and juveniles are lighter with mottled gray-brown bellies. They have a forked tail, long pointed wings, and a short hooked bill.

Where Do They Come From?

Purple Martins winter in the Amazon River Basin in Brazil and migrate north beginning in late January. The same individual birds often return to the same nesting site year after year, and their offspring, once grown, tend to settle nearby.

What Do They Eat?

Purple Martins are aerial insectivores, meaning they eat only while flying. Their menu includes dragonflies, butterflies, moths, bees, wasps, and flies. They forage high in the sky, often hundreds of feet up, catching insects mid-flight in their beaks.

COMMON MYTH — Mosquito Control

Purple Martins do NOT eat mosquitoes. This is one of the most persistent myths about them. Mosquitoes fly close to the ground and at dusk/dawn, while martins forage high up during the day. Setting this record straight is a public service!

Nesting

Purple Martins are obligate cavity nesters. In the eastern US, they almost exclusively use human-provided structures like colony-style birdhouses or hanging gourds. Without human-provided housing, they won't nest in an area. Indigenous peoples, including the Karankawa, Atakapa, and Akokisa in our region, were hanging gourds for martins long before European contact.

Nesting happens in spring. Females lay 4–6 white eggs, one per day. Both parents incubate the eggs and feed the chicks. Nestlings fledge at around 28 days.

Pre-Migration Roosting (What We're Watching)

After the breeding season ends and the young fledge, Purple Martins begin gathering at communal roost sites. These pre-migratory roosts can contain thousands, sometimes tens of thousands, of birds. They gather every evening to rest, spending a few weeks building up energy reserves before their long flight south. In the Houston area, you can see these roosts from July to September.

3 Bird ID: Martins & Friends

Visitors often ask how to tell a Purple Martin from other dark swallows. Here's a quick reference for the three most commonly confused species:

Purple Martin — Adult Male	Purple Martin — Female / Juvenile
Entire body iridescent purple-black. The only swallow with no pale underparts. Large and stocky for a swallow. Forked tail.	Purple-gray back, lighter mottled belly. Subadults may show scattered purple feathers on the chest or throat. Juveniles have a stubby tail and yellow inside the beak.
Tree Swallow	Barn Swallow
Dark metallic blue-green back, clean white belly. Smaller than a Purple Martin. Often seen near water. Sometimes nests in birdhouses.	Deep blue-black back, rusty-orange throat and belly. Long, deeply forked tail (more pronounced than a martin's). Nests in bridges, barns, and house eaves.

DELAYED PLUMAGE MATURATION

Purple Martins take two years to develop their full adult plumage. This is called "delayed plumage maturation." A first-year male looks much more like a female, making ID tricky. Adult males don't reach full purple-black plumage until their third calendar year.

4 Martins in Houston

Houston is positioned at a rich ecological crossroads of coastal prairie, piney woods, bottomland forest, and estuarine wetlands, making it a significant hub for bird migration in both spring and fall. Purple Martins are part of that story.

Despite Houston's rapid development, the birds keep coming back, adapting to urban roost sites in unexpected places. The roosts we watch grow larger week by week as more birds arrive from breeding grounds across the region and further north.

Why This Urban Parking Lot?

Purple Martins favor warm, lit, open urban environments for roosting. Tall live oaks in parking lots offer shelter, ambient warmth from paved surfaces, and reliable landmarks. Once a roost is established, birds return to the same trees year after year.

Roost Size

There's no official count for any individual roost, but typical Houston-area roosts can number in the thousands. Some roosts elsewhere in the US reach tens of thousands. Before heading south, groups of up to 500,000 martins have been recorded at major staging roosts.

Indigenous History — Worth Knowing

In our region, the Karankawa, Atakapa, and Akokisa peoples used the bayous and waterways to navigate the landscape for centuries. Indigenous peoples across the eastern US were providing nest gourds for Purple Martins long before European contact -- a relationship that shaped the martin's dependence on human housing that continues today.

5 Frequently Asked Questions

These are the questions we hear most at every event.

Why are they roosting here — in a parking lot?

Purple Martins favor warm, open, well-lit urban environments for roosting. The tall live oaks here provide shelter and orientation landmarks, and the paved surface retains heat. Once a roost is established, the birds return to the same trees year after year. It's a little surreal, but it's completely normal martin behavior!

Are they nesting here?

No, what you're watching is roosting, not nesting. Nesting happens in spring in specially built colony houses or gourds. These birds have already raised their young for the season and are now gathering at night in large flocks to rest and fuel up before migrating south.

Where do they go during the day?

They disperse widely across the region to forage, sometimes traveling dozens of miles. You might spot them anywhere insects are flying high: along bayous, over fields or lakes, and in urban green spaces. They reconvene here at the roost each evening.

Where are they going? Where did they come from?

Their winter destination is the Amazon River Basin in Brazil, a journey of thousands of miles. Many of the birds you're seeing tonight likely nested somewhere in or around Texas this spring, and others may have come from farther north, using this southern roost as a staging site before the big push. The birds that cross the Gulf of Mexico typically fly 500–600 miles nonstop over 25–30 hours.

How many birds are out there?

There's no official count for this specific roost, but it's safe to say many thousands. Roosts like this grow larger week by week as more birds arrive and stage before migration. The roost ring they create on weather radar at dawn can be several miles across!

Can I get them to nest in my yard?

Yes! Purple Martins in the eastern US nest almost exclusively in human-provided housing. A colony-style martin house or a cluster of hanging gourds on a pole in an open area (away from trees) is the way to go. Houston Audubon has resources on martin landlording. Check out houstonaudubon.org/purplemartins and the Purple Martin Conservation Association at purplemartin.org for detailed guidance.

I see them on weather radar — is that real?

Yes, absolutely real! Just before dawn each morning, the entire roost lifts off and fans out in all directions. On NEXRAD radar, this creates an expanding ring called a "roost ring" that looks like a donut spreading outward from the roost location. Houston Audubon has a guide to tracking it yourself at houstonaudubon.org/purplemartins.

Why are some of them brown/gray instead of purple?

Great eye! Only adult males have the full iridescent purple-black plumage, and they don't get it until their third calendar year. Females, juveniles, and young males are brownish-gray with mottled bellies. You're likely seeing a mix of ages and sexes in the flock. The display boards on the table have a great breakdown of all the plumage types.

I've never birded before — how do I start?

You're already doing it! The best way to start is exactly this: go somewhere birds are, look up, and pay attention. Houston Audubon runs birding walks, field trips, and educational programs for all experience levels. Grab a rack card from the table or visit houstonaudubon.org to find upcoming events near you.

What does Houston Audubon actually do?

Houston Audubon is a local, independent organization dedicated to bird conservation in the greater Houston area. We manage sanctuaries including Edith L. Moore Nature Sanctuary in Memorial and the High Island Sanctuaries on the Bolivar Peninsula. We also run education programs, community science initiatives, and events like this one. See Section 7 for more.

6 Key Talking Points

When you're out with the crowd, these are the moments worth creating:

The "Look Up" Moment

As birds start streaming in, invite people to stop, look up, and just watch. You don't need to narrate. The birds do the work. Silence + sky + thousands of swallows is its own experience.

The Unexpected City Story

Houston's urban landscape may not be the first place you think of for wildlife, but birds don't read city planning maps. We're right at a major ecological crossroads, and every summer, thousands of Purple Martins choose Houston. That says something about this place.

The Human History Hook

Purple Martins and people have shared space for centuries. The Karankawa and other Indigenous peoples of our region were hanging gourds for martins long before European contact. That relationship is why these birds nest here at all. In the eastern US, they depend almost entirely on us for housing.

The Migration Scale

The birds in front of you tonight may be headed to the Amazon Basin. The ones coming from Erie, Pennsylvania will fly approximately 5,000 miles. Those crossing the Gulf of Mexico do the 600 mile stretch nonstop, flying for hours over open water.

The Mosquito Myth Correction

Say this warmly, not pedantically: "I know, everyone wants that to be true! But Purple Martins forage high in the sky, and mosquitoes stay near the ground. They're still incredible pest-eaters; they're just not targeting the ones that are after you."

ON NOT KNOWING EVERYTHING

It's completely okay to say "That's a great question! I don't know the answer off the top of my head, but let me point you to someone who does" or "Let me show you a visual!" while directing them to one of the educational flyers. Honesty builds more trust than guessing.

Note: a copy of this packet will always be available in the supply bin at Purple Martin Watch Parties if you need or would like to reference it!

7 Houston Audubon: FAQs & Talking Points

What does Houston Audubon do?

Houston Audubon is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to advance the conservation of birds and their habitats in the Greater Houston Gulf Coast Region.

- We own and manage over **4,300 acres of habitat** across **18 bird sanctuaries**, most of which are open to the public and free.
- We deliver **education programming for all ages**
- We provide nature experiences through our **community outreach programs** to provide accessible opportunities for everyone to experience the wonder of birding, and unite our community through a shared appreciation for nature.
- We conduct **monitoring and research** through urban and coastal bird surveys and beach-nesting bird programs.

Why are birds important?

- Birds are **ecological indicators**: they're our early warning system. Bird population trends inform us about the health of a habitat or ecosystem. A single feather can help scientists detect pollution in an area.
- Birds are **pest control**: they eat up to 550 million tons of insects per year.
- Birds are **nature's cleanup crew**: over its lifetime, a vulture can provide waste disposal services worth around \$11,600.

Why is Houston important to birds?

- Houston sits on the **Central Flyway**. Birds traveling from South and Central America, sometimes flying over 600 miles nonstop across the Gulf, reach Houston Audubon's coastal sanctuaries as the first land they see to rest and refuel.
- Almost **400 species** of birds have been documented at Houston Audubon sanctuaries alone.
- 1/3 of all birds migrating through the U.S. in spring, and **1/4 in fall**, pass through Texas.

TALKING POINT

Did you know the **Yellow-crowned Night Heron** is the official City Bird of Houston? It lives here year-round and you can find it along the bayous, foraging on roadsides, or even in your backyard. They eat crustaceans, insects, frogs, fish, and turtles.

How can people help birds?

- Create inviting habitat: plant natives, put out bird feeders, include a water feature.
- Keep cats indoors.
- Lights Out during migration: turn off non-essential lighting from 11 PM–6 AM during migration season, especially during peak periods. Subscribe to BirdCast alerts at birdcast.info.

How can people get involved with Houston Audubon?

Become a member or donate at houstonaudubon.org.

Volunteer with us! Opportunities include:

- Sanctuary Workdays (ELMNS and High Island)
- Beach cleanups on the Bolivar Peninsula
- Event & Outreach Volunteers (like tonight!)
- Spring Migration Admissions & Sales Kiosks in High Island
- Natives Nursery (ELMNS and High Island)
- Edith L. Moore Nature Sanctuary Trail Crew
- Monthly Bird Surveys — houstonaudubon.org/programs/birding/bird-surveys/

THANK YOU

These events wouldn't happen without volunteers like you. Your time, curiosity, and care for these birds makes a difference — both in what we're able to offer the community, and in how people leave feeling about the natural world. We're glad you're here.