

## Purple Martin Phenomenon on Dale Hollow

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As the last few snowy and blustery days unfold on Dale Hollow Lake, the shores and hollows will slowly be infiltrated by swarms of small blackish-blue birds. During those first few days of March, first dozens, then thousands of Purple Martins soar back home to the valleys of their birth (hatching, actually).

For some, this highly anticipated and much expected homecoming might go unnoticed completely. For others, spring hasn't sprung until those wonderful chirpings again fill the air. But despite the thoughts and views of many different people across this continent, these Purple Martins are here to stay. And to them, we should be grateful. Let me tell you why.

Our friends, the Martins, must endure many hardships each year during their many long travels. Most of this precious species makes its southerly trek to South America each and every year. Those harsh distances claim many of their tender lives on this yearly excursion, yet it is done annually just as it has been done for decades ... perhaps centuries.

Our many thousands of birds return home in spring and begin the ritual of rearing young. Each Martin pair returns to its nesting ground and sets up housekeeping. If Mother Nature and Father Time agree, those same pairs of birds will hatch at least one and sometimes two sets of hatchlings each year, with some of those hatchings rearing as many as four to six young from the same nest. Thus creating new life to fulfill the rituals and traditions of old.

That's where we landlords step in. As many of you know, my home is Willow Grove Marina. For decades, my family and friends and I have diligently maintained numbers of large Martin houses. People from all over the world come to see these simple structures that house one of Mother Nature's true spectacles. They come to witness the multitudes of beautiful birds that grace our shores.

These birds deserve more mention from me than just a mere stating of their being. These birds help us control those wide spread mosquito populations that plague our northern states. Granted, our climate is not as well suited for the mosquito crop like our northerly friends, but in all honesty, our other friends, the Martins, feed on these tender mosquito delicacies before the tiny bugs feed on us. Martins eat mosquitoes as a large part of their diet...thus making life much more pleasurable for us lake-lovers. And as a fellow lake-lover, I must say that I notice a marked increase in the mosquito population in those days in August when our little comrades fly south again. I miss them greatly the day they're gone.

Martin husbandry (as it's called in the fancy books) is a difficult operation to maintain. Those that chose to build houses and maintain them are forced to uphold a

certain amount of daily maintenance and time-honored practices to keep the home happy (husbandry...I get it). Swarms of Starlings are constantly trying to take over the Martin houses and destroy the nests and young babies feathering within. Those pests must be dealt with on a daily basis with ferocity and vigilance. Martins and Starlings cannot and will not live in the same area. You will have Starlings...and only Starlings. They don't eat mosquitoes and house flies. They don't teach their young to care for the home boxes in which they live (Martins actually do this!). Starlings are thugs that spread disease (ask your doctor) and louse...and destroy the boxes in which they live. They breed like maggots and must be eradicated before they make a strong hold. Those that disagree can look online and see for themselves. A few hundred Starlings were introduced as a small colony in the New England states back about one hundred years ago. Since that time, they have taken over many wonderful habitats and hindered many native bird species nationwide ... all from a few hundred birds. But enough negativity. Let's talk about Martins.

Probably the most special of all the Martin traits are their sense of family. I know that sounds silly, but it's a fact. Over the years, I have hand-raised many baby Martins that have fallen from the box prematurely. After weeks of nurture and hand feeding, I would release them back into the colony. From the second I let go of the tiny birds and they flew into the air, a swarm of other "fatherly" birds would soar in around them and direct the little bird where it needed to go. They remembered the baby bird. Really! I've done it time and time again. The result is always the same. No matter how long the little one has been away...two, three, maybe four weeks...the others take the young one under their wing and take it home. It's beautiful. It will bring tears to your eyes...seeing this community of birds rally around a little baby that should have been forgotten...but wasn't. It's special. I count those moments among my many blessings.

Here's the one everybody loves. Migration. Dale Hollow is on the migratory flight path of the thousands upon thousands of Martins that fly south in July and August. Those enormous swarms of birds that can number into more than 30,000, are so large that they can be detected on weather radar. Our local weathermen know this and account for it in their daily forecasts during those months. No kidding. This happens! They will point at the screen and make note of the large green blotches on the radar screen, remarking that it might be raining there ... but it isn't raining water...

'Nuff said, again.

But the news isn't all happy. The birds do make a mess. The trees outside my cabins house many thousands of birds per day in late July and early August. The front decks of these rental units have literally been iced like a cake. I hose them off everyday in season to remove the trouble...but its back in minutes. Some guests are furious. They rant and rave and want to shoot the birds. But one conversation usually shuts them up. "Why do you come to Dale Hollow, folks?" I ask.

They usually reply, "It's one of the best lakes in the world...and there's no mosquitoes."

I smile and reply, “These birds are a large part of both of your answers. Think on that as I hose off your deck. Three or four weeks a year we wash decks. The other forty-eight...are nearly perfect.”

So if you want to see one of life’s true spectacles ... if you want to witness one of Mother Nature’s purest of gifts to us as humanity ... come see the Martins. Look at the sheer multitudes of feathered friends soaring like clouds in the distance. Hear that wonderful chirp that fills the air with soothing tones of overlapping harmony. Bring your love of nature. Bring your love of life. And if you come in July...bring your umbrella. Come sit by me...I just hosed off the deck.~