



# Howard County Bird Club

A Chapter of the Maryland Ornithological Society

Founded 1972

## Howard County Bird Club Purple Martin Monitoring Suggestions

*by Russ Ruffing and Val Swan. March, 2026*

**Basic Duties Include:** Watch for the arrival of Martins, remove any House Sparrow nests/eggs, grease the baffle with Vaseline to keep snakes out, remove tall growth from around the pole, monitor nests (count and record eggs and babies), remove parasites such as blow fly larvae if present, change the nest bedding once (if needed), clean out boxes after breeding ends. Submit data (if desired) to:

**Purple Martin Conservation Association (PMCA) Project MartinWatch**

<https://www.purplemartin.org/research/18/project-martinwatch/>

### **Adult Arrival, March-May**

The first adult martins begin to arrive at their former colonies in March and April. These are typically full adults in at least their second spring, and many will return to their nesting site from the previous year.

### **Subadult Arrival**

Begins 4-12 weeks after adults have arrived. Subadults are birds that fledged the previous year and are now returning to North America to select a site and breed. These are the birds that typically populate new martin houses and thus, establish new colonies.

### **Arrival Observations**

One may start to keep an eye out for birds the latter half of March, but it is not unusual for a new martin house to attract a new colony even as late as June, so don't be discouraged if nothing happens in April or May. Martins are noisy and boisterous; if they are present, you'll notice them as they fly around and perch on the box and pole. Even if they're intent on breeding at a location, initially they can disappear for long periods of time between sightings, so you should observe the house for 15 minutes or so. Be sure that you aren't mistaking Tree Swallows for martins. Many times, folks will see swallows perched on the box from a distance and just assume they are martins without taking a closer look.

If you see House Sparrow or Starling activity, lower the box and remove their nests and eggs. Starlings should have difficulty entering the smaller "Connolly" entrance holes that the club is using and, therefore, it would be unusual to get a Starling nesting attempt in our "T-14" style boxes. Other species like Eastern Bluebirds and Tree Swallows may nest in one of the compartments; if so, just leave them alone. Martins will happily nest alongside those birds and have done so in several of the club's boxes.

New martin houses may take several breeding cycles to entice a new colony; some boxes may never get a colony. In that case, the club will decide whether to relocate the pole and box to another location. NOTE: The BBA "safe dates" for martin breeding are 6/1-6/25.

### **Nest Building, up to 4-6 weeks after arrival**

Nest building can begin immediately upon arrival but can take place up to four to six weeks after martins arrive. Nest building can take three to four weeks to complete but is usually done in two weeks or less. The last stage in nest building is lining the cup with green leaves that the birds will "clip" off branches. They seem to prefer leaves that are round or oblong and are less than two inches in size.

### **Egg Laying**

Egg laying commences after copulation occurs. Females lay one egg per day, usually in the morning, for a total of two to seven pure white eggs. Three to five is most common.

### **Incubation**

Only females can incubate eggs because only they have a brood patch - a featherless area rich in blood vessels that transfers heat to the eggs. Males may insulate the eggs for short periods of time while the female leaves the nest.

### **Hatching, 15-16 days after incubation**

Fifteen to sixteen days later, the eggs begin to hatch. The eggs may not hatch on the same day, but rather it can be spread out over two or even three days. Once the young have hatched, both parents begin feeding the young. Pin feathers and downy feathers begin to emerge after 7-10 days.

### **Fledging, 26-32 days after hatching**

Fledging occurs 26-32 days after hatching. During the last week or so prior to fledging, the young will often stick their heads out of the compartment or even sit on the porch waiting for the parents to arrive with a tasty morsel. The young receive care from their parents for one to two weeks after fledging. During this time, the young may return to their housing to spend the night. The colonies leave for South America from late July to early September, as soon as the young are strong enough to fly. On rare occasions, a pair can still be incubating eggs into July even after all the other young have fledged. Typically, such attempts are not successful, and the adults abandon the nest and depart with the rest of the colony.



This video recommends monitoring every few days, but realistically every 7-10 days during incubation and thereafter is sufficient. Remember, martins have successfully raised young for eons without any humans “monitoring” their progress! During incubation periods, it may seem quiet and you may not notice any martins around the box as you approach, and wonder what happened. Then, when you start to lower the box for inspection, suddenly dozens of parents may appear. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kX0-lbnufy8>

You may also choose not to lower the box if, upon arrival, you see that the colony seems to be operating normally, and you don't notice any issues or any harassment from House Sparrows or Starlings. The martins will generally “tell you” if something is wrong by their behavior becoming more erratic or alarmed. A caution though...if a snake was able to get up the pole and into one of the boxes, it may be curled up inside while it digests the eggs / young, and the other martins may “forget” that it is there, only to have the snake do the same thing all over again to one of the other nests. So, it is usually preferable to check the box on each visit. Also, be aware that wasps may take up residence in any of the compartments. This is not often but it is good to use caution anytime you open a compartment. Of course, you'd want to remove any wasp nests.

After raising the box back to its full height, please make sure the baffle is sufficiently greased with Vaseline. This substance can last a long time on a baffle but during extremely hot and sunny weather, it may need to be re-applied. Use of Vaseline has proven very successful in preventing snakes from defeating the baffles and accessing the martin houses.

Below is a photo of House Sparrow eggs. This species usually builds a big, messy, haphazard, bulky nest made from string, trash, dry grass, and feathers that fill most of the volume of the compartment. There is often a bit of a “tunnel” to the eggs, which are heavily speckled. If you think House Sparrows are nesting, remove and destroy the nest and eggs, but be aware that they may try to re-nest multiple times in the same box. For that reason, dispose of the nest contents away from the box, as they will just re-use the material to rapidly rebuild if it is left nearby. Be advised that even Brown-headed Cowbirds may attempt to parasitize a martin nest, so be on the lookout for their eggs as well.



Purple Martin eggs on right. The nest is relatively insignificant, usually made from twigs, straw, bark, and mud with fresh green leaves on top. The eggs are pure white.

