



*Louise Chambers  
Purple Martin Conservation Association*

Photos by Louise Chambers/PMCA

# Gisela Fregoe: A Purple Martin Ambassador

If Gisela Fregoe is talking about Purple Martins, chances are she is smiling and wearing something purple. Whether she's caring for the martins in her backyard, working on projects in her hometown of Grand Prairie, TX, or traveling with her husband, Richard, she is always looking for opportunities to tell others about 'these special birds.' Back in 1981 when she saw a wooden bird-house for sale and decided to put one up, she could not have predicted all the experiences Purple Martins would bring to her life.

In the years since then, her commitment to martin conservation has grown to include starting a martin club and asking the US Postal Service to issue a

stamp honoring Purple Martins. A warm and gracious person, she has a special knack for gaining interest and cooperation from others.



Viewed from the street, the Fregoe's attractive home gives no hint that there are so many projects devoted to wild-life in the backyard. An avid gardener, Gisela fills the space in their backyard just as intensely as she uses her time—not an inch or a minute is wasted. The yard is not terribly large, yet it manages to contain a swimming pool, wrapped with a border of herbs and flowers. Beyond the pool small trees harbor feeders for cardinals and other songbirds. A garden stor-



**Opposite page, bottom:** The Fregoe's site during martin season. **Above:** Gisela addresses members of the Purple Martin Landlords of North Texas. Meetings are open to the public and cover a wide range of martin management topics. **Right, top to bottom:** A plastic canvas floor for metal houses is attached with velcro strips. A plastic canvas disk is used to provide textured subflooring in plastic gourds. Coconut fiber makes excellent nesting material to add before the martins return. No water can get inside gourds when the hanging wire runs through a metal tube.

age shed holds martin supplies and just prior to the martins' return, gourds are stacked next to the garage. At the outer border of the yard, along the cedar fence, sprout a row of poles holding martin houses and gourds.

The Fregoe colony has evolved a long way from that first wooden house, now retired. Today they offer 52 cavities—there are three poles for gourds, two for houses, plus two poles with perching arms, one with a martin feeder, and a fall-out shelter. All have pole guards and aerial predator guards.

Like all landlords, Gisela has her favorite housing improvements that are easy to do and beneficial for the martins. To keep nests dry, she installs a tube through the neck of each gourd, and then runs the hanging wire through the tube—this ensures that no rain can get into the neck and drip down onto the nest from the hanging wire. No porches are used on her crescent-entrance SuperGourds. Instead, Gisela prefers to very slightly increase the height of the crescent entrance by 2/16ths of an inch with a knife and file, and then sands them to make sure they are smooth. A strip of Magic Tub & Shower Safety Treads is secured right under the entrance on the inside of the gourd—this added traction makes it easier for the martins to get a good grip with their toenails when negotiating the entrance. For traction, canvas flooring—6" round pieces of Quick Shape Plastic Canvas, made by UNIEK—is secured through the drain holes with garden twist-ties, and the canvas flooring is topped with at least two inches of nesting material. Gisela has tried and recommends cut coconut fiber, pine needles and/or coastal cut hay. Coconut fiber is used in orchid growing, and pine needles are packaged and sold for mulch as pine straw.

Over the years her site has had its share of highs and lows, including snakes bypassing the guards, hawk attacks, and loss

of birds due to very hot or cold weather. Looking for ideas to help her deal with problems made Gisela realize that she could help other landlords by giving them a place to meet and compare notes. Plus, they could all learn about newer

management methods, record-keeping, housing improvements, and more. And most importantly, they could share the positive aspects of being a martin landlord. Gisela believes that the good things about being a landlord by far outweigh the difficulties, and felt that a martin club for area landlords would be a place to share positive experiences too. With that in mind, she founded the Purple Martin Landlords of North Texas (PMLNT) in 1999 with 20 charter members. The club meets every month from January through June, and has more than 130 members. Besides regular meetings, club activities include an annual Marty Party and a trip to the nearest martin roost, in Lewisville. Speakers and varied topics keep things interesting, and the meeting room at Betty Warmack Library in Grand Prairie is often filled to capacity.

Besides the work she does with PMLNT, Gisela has found several ways to promote martins in Grand Prairie and surrounding cities, and to educate the public about them, always with the support of her husband, Richard, a member of the City Council since 1994. Grand Prairie is a city of 156,000+ located between Dallas and Ft. Worth, near the Trinity River. A mural on a fence in a city park includes a Texas-sized martin several feet tall, and children were enlisted to help paint



**Above and right:** With help from Grand Prairie Special Projects Coordinator Tammy Chan, Gisela was able to suggest martins for inclusion in this prairie-themed mural. Artist Tommy Weddle painted the mural at the intersection of Belt Line Road and I-30 after first researching wildlife native to the area.

the mural. On a much larger scale is a highway mural that includes four sweeping paintings illustrating the diversity of wildlife and habitats native to the area. Artist Tommy Weddle did a wonderful job of planning and then painting the mural—wild mustangs, buffalo, and grey wolves cover three corners at the intersection of Belt Line Road and the 1-30 corridor. The fourth corner depicts a wetlands dotted with wading birds like Great Egrets and a small flock of—you guessed it, Purple Martins! Special projects coordinator Tammy Chan helped oversee the mural as part of the city’s Keep Grand Prairie Beautiful program. Other projects to beautify Grand Prairie are in the works, and with Gisela’s enthusiasm always at work, it’s almost guaranteed that Purple Martins will be included in some of them.

It should come as no surprise that Grand Prairie’s mayor, Charles England, issues an annual proclamation declaring “Purple Martin Day” in Grand Prairie. Of course, he’s a landlord, too, thanks to help from the Fregoes. In addition, since Richard’s job includes traveling to other cities, Gisela uses those opportunities to tell civic leaders in other cities about Purple Martins and their unique conservation needs. On a trip to Washington, DC, Gisela visited the US Postal Services stamp advisory committee and presented them with a proposal to issue a US postage stamp honoring Purple Martins.

With all of the projects Gisela undertakes, always with Richard’s support, you can see why she truly qualifies as the Purple Martins’ ambassador. All of her efforts come from the heart—her devotion to martin conservation, landlord education and public awareness is driven by her wish to do more to protect and aid Purple Martins. Every community would benefit from a Gisela and Richard Fregoe, and

so would the martins.

For information about PMLNT meetings or writing letters of support for the Purple Martin stamp proposal, please see <<http://purplemartins.com/NorthTexasMartins/>> or call 972-641-2981.

