



MARTIN 101

Tree Swallow & Bluebird Protocol: Managing Native Species



As you anxiously wait for that first Purple Martin to arrive, a swallow swoops down to inspect the housing and flutters around, checking out all the cavities.

Is this it? Do you finally have Purple Martins? When you realize you have a Tree Swallow rather than a Purple Martin, there may be disappointment at first; but what's the harm in letting them nest? Aren't Purple Martins and Tree Swallows in the same family? Won't they share the housing?

Unfortunately, no, cohabitation rarely occurs, especially at sites that do not have an established martin colony. There is good news though—you can host both Purple Martins, Tree Swallows, and Eastern Bluebirds at the same colony site, but there are rules to follow. The guidelines below can be used for established colony sites, or sites that are looking to attract Purple Martins for the first time.



Tree Swallow pair



Female Eastern Bluebird



Male Eastern Bluebird

The Birds

Purple Martin: Largest swallow in North America. The adult males have iridescent, purple feathers covering the entire body. Adult females have purpler coloring on their head and back than subadult females with darker undertail feathers. Subadult males will have at least one, but usually many, purple feathers on their throats, bellies, or undertail.

Tree Swallow: Member of the swallow family, like the Purple Martin. Smaller, with a blue-green back and snowy white belly. It can be difficult to tell the male and female apart; females tend to exhibit a duller color on their back.

Eastern Bluebird: Male is shorter and stouter than the martins, the male has a brilliant blue back, orange section around the throat area and white belly. Female is duller overall.

What's the harm?

Tree Swallows and Eastern Bluebirds are territorial, both within their own species (intraspecies) and with other avian species (interspecies). They are not colonial, or group, nesters like

Purple Martins. They prefer single-unit cavities, away from other birds. Once they have claimed their cavity, they defend it—as well as the area around the cavity.

While Purple Martins are, and should be, everyone's favorite bird, there is no denying they are not a particularly aggressive bird, especially when it comes to other species. Purple Martins exhibit a strong site fidelity and while in active colony sites adult martins may drive off other species interested in their housing. If you are trying to attract Purple Martins, the subadults, the younger birds that fledged last season, and adults who are investigating new housing will generally not be aggressive or tenacious enough to fight off Tree Swallow interference.

What can you do?

Tree Swallows and Eastern Bluebirds, both native species and protected under the same Migratory Treaty Act as Purple Martins should not be harmed, just as the martins, including their

nest, eggs and young. They are both wonderful birds to have nesting and you can enjoy both Purple Martins, Tree Swallows and Eastern Bluebirds at your colony site, you just need to act quickly.

The Protocol

Planning: Timing matters—both Tree Swallows and Eastern Bluebirds tend to arrive earlier than Purple Martins, so the ideal time to establish the protocol is before the martins arrive.

Be proactive! Have extra housing for both bluebirds and Tree Swallows ready. Have a bluebird box, with a 1 ½ in. entrance available. If you are using gourds as Purple Martin housing, have an extra gourd or two available, which can be purchased with a smaller entrance or a hole reducer if you have a round entrance to prevent European Starlings from nesting. Both Tree Swallows and bluebirds can use all starling-resistant entrances.

Location, location, location: The ideal distance to place Tree Swallow

Rules to Follow

Rule #1:

Never allow a Tree Swallow or bluebird to nest in your martin housing

What if Tree Swallows or bluebirds have already claimed a cavity in your martin housing and your martins have not yet returned? If you have gourds, remove the entire gourd and place it 25 to 35 ft. from the martin housing. Block off the other gourds, lower the housing or if possible, remove the other gourds completely. If you have a martin house, offer an alternate nest box or single gourd 25 to 35 ft. from the martin housing. Block off the martin house cavities and lower the housing.

Try to place the new alternate housing with the entrance facing the martin housing. If you have both Tree Swallows and bluebirds at the site, offer multiple housing units for them. Keep an eye out for House Sparrows that may try to nest in the newly offered housing as well. The House Sparrows are a nonnative bird and may be managed by trapping, shooting, or nest removal.

Rule #2:

Never deny a Purple Martin access to the martin housing

Have martins investigating? Great! Here's where it gets tricky. You can safely open the martin housing once the Tree Swallows or bluebirds have claimed, and are committed to, the alternate housing. Ideally, the Tree Swallows and bluebirds would have a nest built, with eggs laid, to ensure their commitment to the alternate housing. What happens if you have Purple Martins, but the Tree Swallows or bluebirds just started building? Here's where we follow Rule #3.

Rule # 3:

Rule #1 is crucial and should be followed before Rule # 2

If the Tree Swallows or bluebirds have only started nest building and you have Purple Martins visiting what do you do? If you are not at your colony site to monitor, then the entrances of the martin housing need to remain closed. If you allow the Tree Swallows or bluebirds to claim the cavity, you'll need to start the procedure all over again. However, if you are able to monitor the housing then you can open a few entrances on the martin housing but be prepared to close them off again if the Tree Swallows or bluebirds show interest.

or bluebird housing is 25-35 ft. from your martin housing. This should allow the Tree Swallows and bluebirds enough space that they will allow Purple Martins to nest in the martin housing, while preventing other Tree Swallows or bluebirds from nesting. There may be some initial squabbling and defensive gestures but determined martins should prevail.

Why is this distance so crucial? If the alternate housing is located closer to the martin housing, they will be even more territorial, even if they accept the alternate housing. If the alternate housing is placed further away, there's a risk that you may have a separate pair move into the martin housing, and your existing Tree Swallows or bluebirds will allow them to nest.

Convincing: Convince the Tree Swallows and bluebirds that the new housing is their only choice. Make sure that the alternative housing is the ONLY housing available to them. Remove or close off other bluebird/ Tree Swallow housing that may be in the area. Ensure that the martin housing is closed up or removed. You need to guide them into the housing you want. There's a trick to make alternate housing more attractive to Tree Swallows—the McKinnon Flasher. This is an easy DIY trick that involves a piece of string, and a white lid (such as from a cottage cheese or sour cream container). Trim the white plastic to mimic the size and shape of the white underbelly of the Tree Swallow. Hang the decoy well above or below the entrance of the alternate housing, making sure to keep the string away from the entrance to avoid entanglement.

While Tree Swallow and bluebird interference can be frustrating, following these rules and protocol above will offer you the best chance at attracting Purple Martins. If you aren't lucky enough to attract martins this season, you'll be in a much better position next season when the Tree Swallows and bluebirds begin to arrive. ➔

**adapted from Dan Drew's Tree Swallow Interference- original can be found at www.purplemartin.org*