

# Tending to Sick, Injured, or Orphaned Purple Martins

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**M**any times a bird enthusiast or a child will find a bird on the ground, or in an “unnatural” situation. In most cases, the caring individual(s) will pick the bird up and try to care for it themselves, without having the proper training to do so. The bird usually dies and the people are heartbroken and frustrated. This article is intended to educate the public on how to give a Purple Martin or other songbird a better chance of recovering from sickness, injury, or from being orphaned.

The first step is to determine whether the Purple Martin is actually sick, injured, or orphaned, or if the bird has accidentally fallen out, or was pushed out, of its nest. It is obvious that when a Purple Martin is found on the ground, something is wrong. Before doing anything, check to see if there are any visible injuries. The most obvious is the sight of fresh blood, or brown matted areas on the bird. This helps determine if a predator has taken it out of the nest. Take notice of the position of the wings. If one wing is in a different position than the other, or if the wing is drooping, there is a good chance it is bruised or broken. If so, this Purple Martin needs immediate attention. Also, determine if there are abnormally high numbers of parasites, such as feather lice or mites, crawling on the feathers.

If any of the above conditions exist, the bird needs to be placed in the hands of a wildlife rehabilitator or avian veterinarian for proper treatment and care. If none of the above conditions exist, pick the martin up and feel the chest area (keel). The keel is located in the middle of the chest, running parallel to the spine. At normal body weight, there should be a fullness to each side of the keel. This is the pectoral muscle. If you do not feel a fullness, and the keel feels like it is sharply protruding, the bird is starving. Also feel the feet and legs for an estimate of temperature. Since a healthy bird's

temperature averages 101 degrees (or higher), the legs and feet should be warm to the touch. If they are cold, this may be an indication of shock or hypothermia.

A few more factors may be taken into account if none of the above conditions exist. If the bird is not yet mature enough to

be a fledgling, it should be returned to the nest. Most birds cannot smell, so you do not need to worry about your scent being on the bird. Carefully place the bird back in the nest. From your written nest records, you will know which cavity is missing a nestling. Be sure the nest you put it in has siblings the same age. Move a distance away from the martin housing. Watch the cavity for approximately one hour to see if an adult is returning to tend to its nestlings. If not, the nestling has been abandoned.

If the Purple Martin is an adult, there is a possibility that it may be stunned due to flying into a pole, line, tree, or window. Prepare a box that is larger than the bird (a shoebox is fine). Poke holes into the sides and lid of the box. Place a clean T-shirt, pillowcase or close-knit rag in the bottom of the box. Put the bird in the box and cover the box with the lid. Secure the lid with a couple pieces of tape. Take the box into your house, putting it in a warm, safe, and quiet room. Wait approximately 45 minutes.

Sometimes the bird can be heard fluttering in the box. Take the box outside, place it on the ground, and open the lid. The Purple Martin, if recovered, will fly out of the box. If it does not, and lays in the box without attempting to fly, or tries to fly out and lands on the ground, its injuries are more severe. Put the bird back in the box, put the lid on, and take it back into the house. Call your wildlife rehabilitator or avian veterinarian, or call the state wildlife agency (in Pennsylvania, for example, call the PA Game Commission) to locate the closest rehabilitator.

## What to Do For an Injured, Sick, or Orphaned Purple Martin

Find a box a little larger than the bird. Poke holes in the sides and lid of the box for ventilation.

Place a clean T-shirt, pillowcase, or close-knit rag in the bottom of the box. Make a nest out of rags or a knit cap.

Capture the bird by taking a towel or towel-sized rag and putting it over the bird. This will help calm the bird because it cannot see you and it feels like a wing over it. Pick the bird up and put it in the box.

Cover the box with a lid and place it in a warm, quiet and safe place in your house.

Wash your hands.

Contact your local wildlife rehabilitator or avian veterinarian, immediately. Your state wildlife agency can help you locate the closest wildlife rehabilitator.

### Do not:

Handle the bird except to put it in the box. Stress and shock will kill the bird before the injury.

Give the bird water or food, unless you have been given instructions or trained under a wildlife rehabilitator.

Leave the bird in the heat of the sun, or cold of the winter.

Transport it in the trunk of a car or bed of an open truck.

Wait to call wildlife rehabilitator or avian veterinarian. Timeliness is very important to the survival of the Purple Martin.

