



Persistence Pays Off: Purple Martins at McGraw

Story and photo by Clark Ganshirt/McGraw

Nearly a decade ago, after the completion of the reclamation work and seeding on the southwest corner of Bruning Bay, a lone martin house was erected in hopes of attracting purple martins to the Foundation.

Over subsequent years, we monitored the house but no martins were seen. But persistence pays off, and during the recent 2017 Audubon Spring Bird Count it became clear that six to eight pairs of purple martins had taken up residence at McGraw.

The purple martin is 7 ¼ to 8½ inches in length with a forked tail. The male is an iridescent dark blue-purple with brown/black wings and tail. The females are duller in color with variable amounts of gray on head and chest and a whitish lower belly. They are cavity nesters.

Purple martins are highly desirable birds, and many homeowners love to see them in their yards. They belong to a group of birds known as aerial insectivores -- birds that feed on airborne insects. This makes them highly beneficial to people

They're also fun to watch, because they eat, drink and bathe while on the wing.

Native Americans liked them too, and attracted the birds by hanging hollowed-out gourds. Those still work, but today there are many different types of martin houses.

In fact, it is widely believed that today most nesting purple martins east of the Rocky Mountains are using artificial/manmade structures. They may be the only bird entirely dependent on humans to provide nesting structures.

A cool fact: Putting up martin houses at one time was so common that famed naturalist John James Audubon used their presence to choose his lodging for the night.

Almost every country tavern had a martin house attached to its signboard; Audubon stated that he observed that the handsomer the box, the better does the inn generally proved to be.

This may not be true today, but having these birds around your property can certainly be entertaining, due to their social relationship with people.

McGraw Vice President Clark Ganshirt is an avid birder and the repository of great knowledge about the birds frequently seen at the Foundation. Stop by and chat with him sometime!