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Purple Martins

Near the bridge in Mauricetown NJ, in Mid-August, there are sightings of what appear to be purple clouds. There's no threatening weather system, however: The skies are filled with *tens of thousands* of Purple Martins, preparing for their annual trip to Brazil. After foraging all day, they arrive at dusk, in swirling flocks that spiral over the river, and then settle down in the reed-filled marshes for the evening.

At 7 ½ inches long it is North America's largest swallow. The more colorful males have an iridescent, dark purple color; females have a lighter-colored breast.

It's believed that, before Europeans settled in America, Native Americans would hang 'birdhouse gourds' for the Purple Martins, beginning a tradition of man-made housing that continues to this day. In fact east of the Rockies, Purple Martins are almost totally dependent on humans for their nesting sites.

Purple Martins hunt flying insects, like dragonflies, butterflies, wasps and bees.

Martins return from Brazil in early April. Scouts flying 'advance detail' defend nesting sites that are used year-after-year by the same, monogamous parents. Purple Martins will lay up to eight eggs, hatching in about two weeks. The babies are ready to 'fledge' – to leave nest – in about four weeks.

Citizens United is a sponsor of the Purple Martin Festival each August. "CU" also supports the work of Allen Jackson who bands as many as 8,000 chicks a year.