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Purple Martins  
By Tony Klock

Have you ever seen a purple cloud? Most clouds are white of course, but if you happen to be on the Maurice River in mid-August in the vicinity of historic Mauricetown you might be lucky enough to witness one of the region's great natural spectacles; that of the purple martins.

Purple Martins are the largest species of swallow that are found throughout North America. They are around 7 ½ inches long with the males showing a deep and solid iridescent purple color that may appear black in low light conditions and the females appear less showy with a lighter color breast.

Many people believe that martins eat mosquitoes, but unfortunately this is not true. Since the purple martins feed mainly during the daytime, they hunt flying insects like dragonflies, butterflies, wasps and bees among many others. On long summer days, you are likely to see martin parents with beaks full of insects for their nestlings.

Purple Martins are associated in people's minds with the familiar bird condos and more recently with the white plastic gourds hung high in many folk's backyards. East of the Rockies, purple martins are almost totally dependent on humans for their nesting sites. In the west, martins still primarily use nesting cavities created by woodpeckers. It is believed that before the arrival of Europeans, native peoples would hang the famous birdhouse gourds and thus the tradition of hosting purple martins was begun.

The purple martins return to our area from their wintering grounds in Brazil beginning in early April. Scouts return to the colony and begin to defend their established nesting sites. Martin pairs are monogamous and will return year after year to the same site. The nests are made of mud, twigs, and leaves. They will lay up to eight eggs which take about two weeks to hatch. The parents work hard to keep the babies fed and about 4 weeks later the nestlings will fledge or leave the nest.

Beginning in the second week of August around sunset, the martins begin to gather in the marshes near the Mauricetown Bridge. Groups of martins come in from their day of foraging throughout the area and before dusk the tens of thousands of birds form amazing clouds that spiral and wheel over the river before settling down in the reeds

for the night. By the time September arrives, the martins are on their way back to their wintering grounds south to Brazil.

Citizens United cooperates with other organizations in cosponsoring a Purple Martin Festival each August. C.U. is also proud to partner with “Mr. Purple Martin”, Allen Jackson, in his landlord mentoring program. Each year he bands the thousands of baby purple martins that are produced in the many colonies in our region. Helping to conserve these incredible world travelers demonstrates our commitment to natural resources of Cumberland County.