

Feature Story: View Purple Martins
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View a Phenomenon

Purple Martin Spectacular may be hit-or-miss, but when a hit, it's truly spectacular.

We launched our kayaks at the Mauricetown bypass bridge. The gentle waters of ebb tide allowed us to paddle north, floating past the sun-brushed stands of grasses as we waited for sunset. So many regional artists and photographers have captured the blues and golds and rose-colored skies as the lowering sun reflects off the winding waterway. But we came to witness the cloud—the cloud of purple martins.

It was early August. Breeding season was over for this native songbird. The chicks were out of the nests, and it was time to roost.

During this roosting period, before they migrate to South America, martins come together in such dense gatherings that they can be easily seen on weather radar. The largest birds in the swallow family, they measure 7.5 inches in length with a 15- to 16-inch wingspan. Tens of thousands of the glossy blue-to-purple-to-black birds flock to the bounty of the Maurice River, darkening the sky, diving and flitting en masse over the landscape.

The first noted observations of this natural phenomenon were in the early 1990s. It was estimated that 125,000 martins were staging at this roosting site before leaving on their southward migration, said Allen Jackson, a Purple Martin Mentor. "With a pair of binoculars and some difficulty you could see huge swarms of martins ascending into the sky and then slowly landing on the phragmites, only to take flight time and time again," he said.

Jackson, who is the Wildlife Management director for Citizens United to Protect the Maurice River and its Tributaries, explained that the martins find safety from predators as the wide river corridor offers protection. And they have an abundant food supply of flying insects, the main source of food for the birds. In fact, this area of the Maurice River is the largest staging area on the east coast for martins as they prepare for their journey of nearly 5,000 miles to South America.

In 2007, the first study of this migration was conducted with the technology of geolocators and GPS tags. The studies show that there is some variation in their migration paths, but this area has been favorable to the martins for decades. "Basically we have about 500,000 martins routinely at this site," Jackson said.

They roost here until weather fronts from the north force martins to begin their migration. "Purple martins take advantage of the favorable winds,

which make their journey to Brazil much easier," Jackson said. "If one is lucky enough to be on a boat at peak migration, you could expect to see over one million martins." And that is worth seeing!

"Thanks to some creative minds, a festival emerged not only to show off the roosting site but to have an opportunity to bring in speakers to talk about the importance of proper management," Jackson said.

In 2002, with the assistance of Cumberland County and Maurice River Township, the Purple Martin Spectacular was launched. "As time went on, people were most interested in seeing the Martins coming in to roost for the night," Jackson said.

That's what we were hoping to do from our kayaks that evening. However, the ways of nature are not predictable. We witnessed a sporadic showing of martins over the grasses as they drifted

south. But no swirling murmuration, no swath of martins peppering the skies as we'd hoped to witness. Staging for purple martin roosting had apparently shifted. An excited crowd on a larger vessel motored past us heading south, getting downriver faster than we could ever paddle, and with a better vantage point to see over the tall grasses. The gleeful passengers told us that the purple martins were roosting a mile from the bridge.

Well, the tide was shifting and the sun was all but gone. Much as for the routine of the purple martins, darkness forced us to head back to the shore and call it a night. Next time, we'll reserve our spots on one of the cruises!

As one of the major organizers of this annual event, Citizens United to Protect the Maurice River and its Tributaries (CU Maurice River) offers viewing opportunities during several sunset cruises in early August. Jackson and representatives from CU Maurice River and the NJ Audubon Society will be onboard to answer questions about this

unique natural phenomenon right here along the Maurice River.

To make a booking for a purple martin cruise, go to the CU Maurice River website:

cumauriceriver.org/pay-for-events/ or call the office at 856-300-5331.

