



Center at Pomfret News Release

## Purple Martin Conservation Initiative Expands

### Housing Complexes Now Provided in Nine Quiet Corner Towns

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POMFRET, CONNECTICUT – Purple Martins return to Connecticut to nest in April and May and leave for their wintering grounds in South America in August. They are cavity-nesters and live in colonies. In the eastern United States, they do not use natural cavities but depend on man-made housing to nest and rear their young. There are two types of Purple Martin housing. One is apartment-style bird houses with six or more compartments, each compartment having its own entrance. The other type is clusters of hollow gourds, natural or plastic, hanging from racks on poles, known as gourd trees.

In 2022, The Connecticut Audubon Society (CAS) Center at Pomfret erected housing for Purple Martins on its Bafflin Sanctuary. Open and grassy with Mashamoquet Brook nearby, the housing site offers desirable flood plain habitat and hunting grounds for birds which catch their insect prey on the wing. Ideal habitat for Purple Martins, they quickly established an active colony. Although initially both types of housing were provided, CAS staff found the martins preferred the gourds and more of them were added. In 2025, more than 80% of the gourds were in use.

Four years after housing was provided in Mashamoquet Meadow, the Center's Purple Martin conservation initiative has provided gourd housing complexes in eight additional towns in northeastern Connecticut. The expanded effort has been funded by a generous donation from a CAS member. Complexes have been erected in Chaplin (Hubbard Sanctuary), Eastford (future preserve), Hampton (Little River Preserve and Trail Wood), Mansfield (Knowlton Hill Preserve), Plainfield (Quinebaug Valley State Fish Hatchery), Thompson (West Thompson Dam), Windham (Allanach-Wolf Woodlands), and Woodstock (Roseland Park). The complexes offer a total of 120 nesting cavities.

The more familiar Tree Swallows sometimes nest with Purple Martins, but the two are easily sorted. Adult male Purple Martins are entirely bluish black, although when the sun is shining on them, the males' feathers appear iridescent purple. Purple Martins are the only North American swallows with dark bellies, which is a good field mark. The largest member of the swallow family, they can be distinguished from other swallows by their dark bellies, size, and

slightly slower wing beat. The adult females have dark bluish backs, but gray-brown underparts. It takes two years for Purple Martins to acquire adult plumage. One-year-old (sub-adult) males have dark upper bodies and light, grayish bellies, like females.

Purple Martin song has been described as a beautiful, complex mixture of chortles and gurgles and, in flight, a melodious, even jubilant, twittering or whistling.

Why is all of this attention paid to Purple Martins? As with so many birds, their numbers have been falling for decades. The Purple Martin Conservation Association estimates that the overall martin population has declined by almost 25% in the last 55 years, the equivalent of 2.8 billion birds.

Although it can be difficult to imagine what we can do to help given the enormity of the loss, conservation begins locally. The Center at Pomfret's Purple Martin initiative certainly helps increase the numbers of birds in our region. And there are many steps we can take as individuals.

- Foster insect populations which are the foundation of the avian food web – leave a section of your lawn unmown (No Mow May), rake leaves to your lawn's edges and leave them there in autumn, refrain from using lawn and other chemicals.
- Plant pollinator gardens and native, berry-producing shrubs.
- Provide species-specific nesting boxes in appropriate locations.
- Leave dead trees (snags) in place for cavity nesting birds and other animals.

These are just some actions that create good habitats and increase the likelihood of nesting success for a variety of birds as well as other creatures.

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*The Connecticut Audubon Society protects Connecticut's birds, other wildlife, and their habitats through conservation, education, and advocacy.*