



www.ontariopurplemartins.ca

Our Martins are on their way back to us, and of course, we never know what kind of weather will greet them. But, thanks to experimentation that has been going on all across North America since about the early 1990's (see some interesting history further down), there are some things we DO know ...

... that Purple Martins and Spring Weather do not always go together!

Weather can take a terrible toll on martins already weakened by their long migration. Here is good information to guide us when figuring out if our martins might not be able to find enough natural food.

- **50 degrees ... sunny ... no wind = bugs**
50 degree ... overcast ... strong wind = few or NO bugs

Although 50 degrees is the often-stated threshold for flying insects, there are factors other than temperature that affect the natural food source. Strong wind, persistent rain, and consecutive overcast / cold days can limit the bugs available, even if the temperature gets into the 50's or higher.

Following their long migration, the earliest returning birds may be in a weakened state. Non-stop foraging for a small insect supply can expend as much energy as is gained.

Martins can survive intermittent days of no-feed condition, but after about 3-4 consecutive days of no food, they are weakened to the point of not being able to fly even if the weather improves.

... that Purple Martins can be taught to accept supplemental food:

Supplemental feeding has now been going on for so long that your purple martins may have been "taught" by landlords south of us. Many people throughout the US have reported that their martin numbers swell and ebb at times during migration as martins moving further north stop for rest at their colonies. If feeding is being done at those sites, your birds might have learned the skill already. Several of our members have reported, over the last few years, that when they began trying to teach their Martins, they seemed to already know it.

... why people teach them, and feed them:

Many began feeding their birds following a devastating loss of many, or all, of the birds in their colony. Others began feeding to avoid that kind of loss. Southwestern Ontario, the locale in which the OPMA began, is a somewhat martin-rich area, and colonies can be rebuilt. But many landlords elsewhere have waited years to establish their PM colony and may have to wait many more to get re-established if they lose them. And, many believe it is no different than putting food out for other songbirds – it helps them to survive but also brings the natural world a bit closer to us for our enjoyment.

Most Martins will learn this skill. Some don't seem to ever learn it. But the ones that do, will remember it in the following years, and other martins will learn by watching them

... what and how much to feed them:

Crickets, mealworms, and eggs are all good protein sources for martins, and are good substitutes when they can't find natural food.

Per the PMCA (*Purple Martin Conservation Association*):

- An adult martin can maintain its weight on **40 crickets a day**, **if that's all it is eating**.
- One cooked egg will feed two adult martins for one day, so **one egg = 80 crickets**.
- No specifics were available on mealworms, but a guess would be that **100 mealworms** a day might be required per adult martin.

... when to feed them:

Following several days of weather as described above they are beginning to be stressed and hungry. Now is the time to try. If they don't take your offerings right away, they probably aren't hungry enough just yet. Purple martins naturally look to the sky for their food, and their instinct tells them that insects aren't available in certain weather conditions, so they sit and wait rather than wasting energy on a futile search. When we begin to fling food for them, they may just watch as the food "flies" by - it may take a while for them to take the leap of faith that what they are seeing is actually food.



Watch perched birds for drooping wings — a sign that the martin's system is beginning to break down and digest its primary flight muscles. This is definitely a good time to try.

... how to feed them:

The procedure is well documented online, and demonstrated in you-tube videos, but here's some basics:

If you have frozen (then thawed) crickets, that is the best way to start.

Stand in a spot where you can fling/flip crickets into the air in front of and above them. Use a small plastic picnic spoon; put a cricket in the spoon, bend it back and let it fly. You'll be surprised how high they go. Don't be discouraged if you waste a few (or dozens). Once that first bird goes after a cricket, many others will follow. And once they've learned, they never forget.

Crickets can be flung, or placed on porch of house, or on inside porch of gourds. If your birds are not yet trained to take supplemental food, placing crickets in their housing is definitely worth a try – many people have reported that the martins ate them even though they themselves had not trained them.

Once your birds are accepting crickets, you can work on switching them to scrambled eggs. Mix your flipping between crickets and eggs. If you have a feeding tray, you can put a mix of crickets and eggs there. Many people report that their birds seem to prefer eggs.

- **How to thaw frozen crickets:** Put the desired number of frozen crickets in a small sieve and run hot water over them, or thaw at room temperature.
- **How to prepare eggs:** Break eggs into a microwavable bowl. Mix them up well with a fork. (DON'T ADD ANYTHING.) Microwave 30-40 seconds, then stir and break with a fork. Repeat. Repeat once more. Eggs should be cooked but still fluffy. Break the egg up into smaller pieces with a fork or a small potato masher. Some landlords prefer to cook the eggs in a frypan and then slice into small squares. Fling eggs or put in a feeder tray.

Great information is available about supplemental feeding in:

... the Ontario Purple Martin Association website: www.ontariopurplemartins.ca

... the Purple Martin Conservation Association: www.purplemartin.org

A little bit of interesting history:

Feeding martins chicken eggs originated with a man named **Ed Donath**, and he did it for many years (since at least 1993) before other landlords followed his lead. It was the widespread, horrible martin-killing weather of May 2002 that prompted so many landlords to attempt supplemental feeding. Some tried feeding eggs when they ran out of crickets - and succeeded!

Ed lived in a Chicago suburb and started his colony decades ago when there was plenty of natural food around. Urban sprawl nearly caused him to lose his colony until he began heavy supplemental feeding, initially with mealworms and eventually with chicken egg "pancake" strips.

"By the last week in June 1993, the martin congestion at our mealworm feeder had reached chaotic levels, as 7 pairs were taking food to their young during bad weather. A radical design change was necessary. So, a larger platform feeder, in the shape of a star, was introduced. Order was restored. A martin could now land on one of the unoccupied star points, wait a moment for a clear path to the food in the central area, snatch a bite of food, and quickly return for takeoff. My star feeder design will accommodate a dozen pairs of Purple Martins at a time, without overcrowding."

