

A Basic Guide to Feeding Martins

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Editor's note: Whether it's elk on a winter feed ground in the Rocky Mountains, or Purple Martins arriving early in Pennsylvania, supplemental feeding of wildlife often elicits debate over the pros and cons of feeding. In the case of Purple Martins, arguments range from "martins should be fed certainly during times of inclement weather, if not routinely", to "let nature take its course". The debate over supplemental feeding of wildlife is likely to continue as long as people care about wildlife, and it is not likely to conclude with a definitive, universally accepted view.

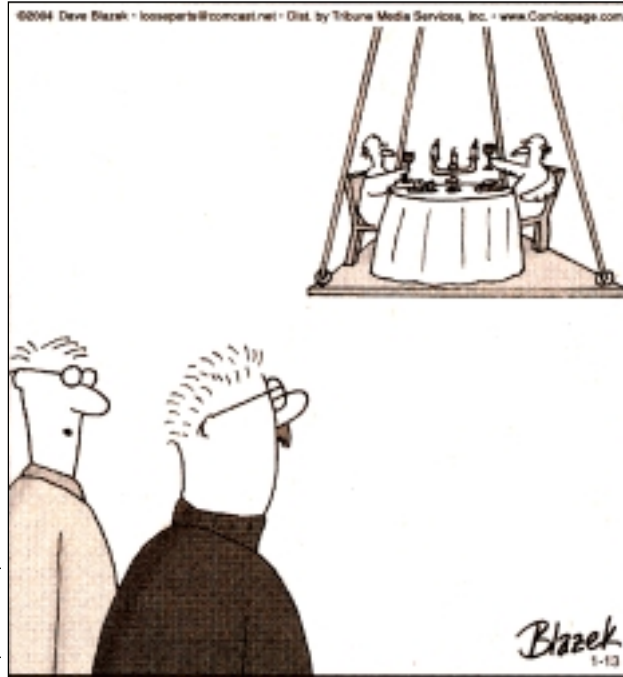
Here at the PMCA, we recognize and appreciate that Purple Martin landlords care deeply about their birds and wish to do all that they can to ensure their survival. Some landlords will elect to feed, while others who care just as much will not. It's a choice to be made by the individual landlord, according to his or her beliefs and circumstances. If you do choose to feed, you will find that Tim Shaheen's video, available through PMCA, and Casey Evans-Cable's article below, provide excellent advice. If you choose not to feed, we do not believe that you are any less a caring landlord. The two most important considerations for ensuring the survival and prosperity of Purple Martins remain: provide proper housing; and deter nest competitors and predators.

When to Consider Feeding

Four types of weather conditions can adversely affect insect availability, causing Purple Martins to starve: constant temperatures below 50 degrees, steady rain or drizzle, strong winds, and dense fog. The average martin will survive for about 4-5 days without food, but will become weakened after 2-3 days, so it is best to begin feeding before they become too weak to fly. Feeding is even more beneficial when martins have nestlings to feed, as nestlings may only survive one or two days without food.

Feeding Methods

The two basic supplemental feeding methods are active (food tossed into the air) and stationary (food offered on a platform or inside a nest cavity or porch). Martins feed only on flying insects, so they need to be "trained" to recognize crickets, mealworms, and cooked egg as food when weather



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"I gotta tell you, Gill. I think you've crossed some sort of bird feeder line here."

is not conducive to foraging. Tossing or propelling food items into the air cues the martins to go after the food, so this is usually the best way to begin supplemental feeding. Food can be tossed into the air by hand, or with a slingshot, plastic spoon, or blowgun; it helps if the food is tossed as high as, or slightly above, the martin housing. Try tossing food when the martins are sitting out on perches or porches; toss it so it arcs up into the air a few feet in front of them. Many wasted shots may hit the ground before the martins begin to take the airborne food, so be ready to give the martins a chance to catch on before giving up. If they refuse to chase the food, they may not be hungry yet.

Stationary feeding on a platform is usually most effective once the martins have already learned to accept tossed food. Martins may have a difficult time recognizing items offered on trays or inside houses or gourds as food unless they have already learned that these items are food through active (tossed) feeding. However, some landlords have reported success with in-house feeding, so it's worth trying. As with active feeding, it can take martins several days to catch on, so landlords may want to start stationary feeding at the onset of poor weather, by providing some items in a feeder while also tossing food.

Transitioning from tossed to stationary feeding is a worthwhile effort, since it saves energy for the martins. Staff at the PMCA were able to train the martins to use a Bed & Breakfast feeder by tossing food directly above the feeder, which was stocked with dead crickets and mealworms. The martins learned fairly quickly that the trays were full of insects, and began to land on them and eat.

What to Feed

Crickets are highly suitable for active feeding because they closely resemble grasshoppers, a normal prey item for martins. Crickets are purchased live, but for stationary feeding, use dead crickets, since live crickets will escape. Place crickets in the freezer to kill them and thaw before feeding to the martins. Crickets can be stored in freezer bags for months.

Mealworms are also purchased live, and can be stored in the refrigerator. They are suitable for platform feeding, and

can be offered in shallow containers, but not on flat trays, as they'll crawl away and escape.

Cooked egg can be introduced once the martins have accepted insects. Eggs are easy to find and are much less expensive than insects. An added benefit to feeding eggs is the good supply of eggshells you'll have for the martins. Eggs require more preparation time than crickets or mealworms. The following recipe originated with Ed Donath of IL: Combine six large eggs and 1/4 cup of water; beat until well mixed. Microwave on high for 45 seconds, remove and stir well, then microwave for 45 seconds. Repeat until eggs are fluffy. Note: if the martins are feeding nestlings, do NOT add water to the egg, as it will make nest sanitation more difficult for the parents. Break cooked egg into 1/8"-3/16" pieces. Cool before serving. Cooked egg will keep in the refrigerator for 2-3 days, but uneaten food in the feeder will spoil, so replace it daily.



Hungry martins eating mealworms from a Bed & Breakfast platform feeder at the PMCA's Edinboro, PA, research site.

James R. Hill, III


The table below lists sources and additional information on supplemental foods. The sources mentioned for crickets and mealworms are just a few of the many available. Prices and shipping services will vary.

Comments & Cautions

Even when supplemental feeding is practiced at martin colonies, it will not save every bird from starving. Not all martins will learn to accept food, though many will learn just from watching other martins take tossed food or feed from platforms.

Avoid encouraging the martins to take food from your hands or to associate people with being fed. They may end up approaching the wrong person for food and get swatted at (or worse) by someone who thinks the birds are attacking them. Don't lower housing to add food to porches or compartments when the birds are coming in to roost for the night. As soon as the bad weather ends, check all cavities for weak or dead birds.

Acknowledgments

Many individuals have contributed to the ideas presently used in offering supplemental food to weather-stressed Purple Martins. One of the first landlords to feed martins from a platform was Ed Donath of Arlington Heights, IL. Ed also was one of the first to use cooked eggs as a food. Ed's recipe has been tweaked by Ohio landlords Dan & Sherri Bacak, and Michigan landlord Mary Dawson. Bruce Meyer of Wichita, Kansas was the first landlord we know of to train his martins to accept mealworms as food by using a slingshot to hurl them into the air. 

	MEALWORMS	CRICKETS	EGGS
COST	Large (1") \$5.00 / 1,000 \$17.00 / 5,000	\$13.00 /1,000	\$1-\$2 /dozen
STORAGE & CARE	Will mature and reproduce at room temperature. Can be refrigerated for weeks. Do not freeze.	Can be frozen and thawed before serving	Cooked egg can be refrigerated for up to 36 hours
PREPARATION TIME	None		5-10 minutes (cooking time plus time to cool before feeding)
METHODS OF FEEDING	Active or stationary	Active feeding: live or dead well-accepted. Stationary feeding: frozen, thawed. (live crickets will escape from feeder).	Active, then transition to stationary
AVAILABILITY	Plan ahead and buy in bulk. Overnight & rush delivery is usually available		Excellent
QUANTITY TO FEED	20 giant mealworms (17.4 grams) per bird per day	Approximately 32 (17.4 grams) per bird per day	6 large eggs will feed 10 martins for 1 day
SOURCES	* www.reptilefood.com *Grubco: (800) 222-3563 www.grubco.com *Fluker Farms: (800) 735-8537 www.flukerfarms.com		Grocery or convenience store