

A large flock of Purple Martins flying against a sunset sky. The birds are silhouetted against a background of soft, warm colors ranging from light pink to deep purple. The birds are scattered throughout the frame, creating a sense of movement and density. The overall mood is serene and majestic.

Purple Martin

Spect

2015 marks the 14th year we have hosted this event. Every year brings something different and unexpected. This year was going to be no different. I was excited because we had sold out all our boat trips on the Bodacious, had people coming from as far as 325 miles away, and had some of the best martin landlords in New Jersey, Delaware and Pennsylvania on board. We regularly attract people with a wide array of interest in martins, from colony landlords, biologists and birding experts to families and environmental groups. People from all over the northeast and mid-Atlantic (Rhode Island, New York, Maryland, Virginia) make the trip to the Maurice River. This year we were especially pleased to share the same boat with our Amish neighbors from two different communities in Pennsylvania. All have come to see one of Mother Nature's best shows, the Purple Martins staging at their pre-migratory roosting site on the Maurice River in Cumberland County.

acular

Jersey Style

The Purple Martin roost on the Maurice River.

*Allen Jackson
Millville, NJ*

All Aboard!

The party boat Bodacious, owned and operated by Captain Tim Smith, docks at the Longreach Marina in Bivalve, which is adjacent to Shellpile, two localities of distinction on the Maurice River. Captain Tim has partnered with us the entire 14 years, playing a major role in showcasing the Purple Martin roost. As people board the boat there is a sense of anticipation for repeat passengers and wonder for those seeing this the first time. Are the martins here? Will there be as many as they say? Will we need binoculars to see them? Without hesitation I answer all their questions. The martins never disappoint, weather occasionally does, but not the martins; and, yes, bring your binoculars.

The boat departs around 6:30 p.m., meandering upriver to the staging area. Birding experts point out numerous Bald Eagles and Ospreys, as well as other avian species. The leisurely cruise allows time to mix and mingle with the passengers. So many questions, so much interest. I try to spend time with everyone. Before long we are nearing Mauricetown, passing under the bridge about 7:30 p. m., just as the martins are beginning to assemble. The atmosphere becomes more serious, anticipating the spectacle. The next 45 minutes will be a continuous show of Purple Martins swarming simultaneously from the phragmites (a large perennial grass found in wetlands), and swirling around the sky, only to descend back into the reeds. We will see dozens of swarms during this period, but most people are so intent on watching each swarm that they fail to notice the thousands more martins joining the existing birds. Without binoculars you cannot see all the martins using the roost. Besides the swarms there are martins on the reeds, in the sky above you, behind you, on your left, to your right. It is only then that you appreciate and understand the magnitude of the site. The last few swarms are usually the best but also the hardest to take good pictures of in the dim light. Photos do no justice—one needs to be there to appreciate how spectacular this sight is.

I try to remind everyone to notice the birds dive-bombing down into the reeds with enough speed to impress a Peregrine Falcon. As the light fades, the martins become more anxious to settle in for the night and finally do, stopping all activity. As we begin our return to the marina, I get bombarded with, "How many martins did we see?" Obviously, there are too many to count and I can only estimate numbers by comparing to previous trips. I feel confident estimating 500,000 martins but am also extremely comfortable saying as the numbers in the roost peak, they easily exceed 1,000,000. I was on five of the six trips on the Bodacious this year, and each trip is different just as each year is different. I now understand the reason each trip is different is related to weather patterns and the number of martins at the roost.

While every trip is dramatic, every so often, one or two trips stand out from the rest in both numbers and magnitude. Friday, August 21st was such a trip. As we cruised upriver we began seeing martins much sooner than usual. When we passed under the bridge the martins were already extremely active and the numbers were certainly more than expected. You could sense something was different. That evening was like no other I have witnessed. The roost had doubled in size in just five days. There were so many martins in the skies that it delayed their opportunity to roost for the night. After the birds finally settled in, a few of us who have seen other roosting sites (including the roosts on Lake Murray and Lake Erie), tried to estimate how many martins we had seen. Every estimate was over one million, some saying two million! I now feel more confident estimating between 500,000 and up to 1-1/4 million Purple Martins during their peak.

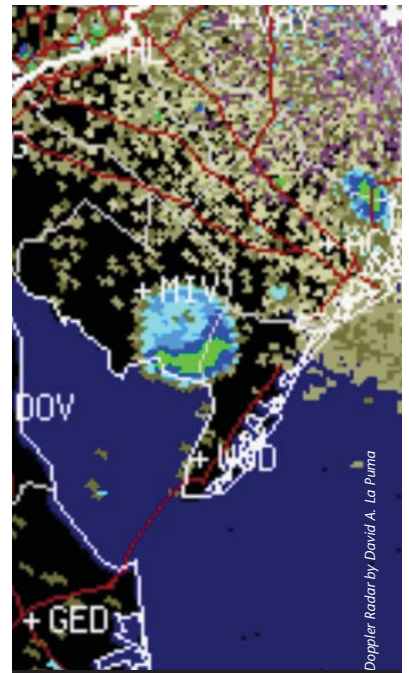
I did not realize what we had seen or why until the next evening, Saturday's trip. The trip upriver again seemed different but this time because we were not seeing the martins where we had seen them the previous trip. It was especially evident when we passed under the bridge and few martins were flying around. As the evening grew darker more birds showed up, the activity level increased and they put on their spectacular show but it did not compare to Friday's trip. Someone mentioned the front

that moved in overnight. A Northwest front brought cooler temperatures and the favorable winds the martins need to migrate. Birds sense atmospheric pressure changes. That was what brought more martins to our roost site and that was what they were waiting for to start their migration to South America.

We have a number of smaller staging areas in New Jersey (Salem River area, Mullica River, Great Egg Harbor River near Somers Point, Barnegat, and Rumson). Weather changes likely caused martins in those smaller roosts and other sites to relocate at our roost. I was disappointed that only those 60 people on the Bodacious that Friday got to witness this special evening. Usually the birds depart without much notice but this year we got to understand better what was happening.

History Behind the Roost

There is early reference of Purple Martins staging in the wetlands in Cape May but habitat changes and development pressures caused them to relocate to unknown areas. It was not until the early 1990s when Pete Dunne noticed large numbers of martins flying at dusk outside his home in Mauricetown, and he was then able to document the martins using the wetlands of the river to roost. The Maurice River corridor is wide, up to one mile wide in places. The expansive phragmites offers a safe place for the martins to roost, feeding on the abundance of insects to build



Doppler Radar showing martins leaving roost area at 5:44 AM on August 14, 2015. Area represents 15-18 miles.

“That evening was like no other I witnessed. The roost had doubled in size in just five days.”

fat reserves, waiting for favorable winds to migrate. We are fortunate in that the river is perfectly suited for such a buildup of martins. It is enjoyed by all and affords no health issues to the public.

For most of the past 25 years, the birds have staged upriver of the Mauricetown Causeway, always dependable, always there. In 2013 the birds relocated downriver of the bridge, just two days before our event; however, we were able to scramble the positioning of the flatbed trailer for those on shore to still see the birds. We were fortunate that the boat could get extremely close to the birds. Never had the passengers been able to view them so close. In 2014 the birds pulled another fast one, this time relocating one mile downriver. Only those on board were able to view the birds that year. The bonus was they staged on the west side of the river, affording spectacular numbers with an equally spectacular sunset. This year they returned to their original roost location upriver of the bridge.


Promoting the Roost

The Purple Martin Spectacular is organized each year by Citizens United to Protect the Maurice River, Maurice River Township, New Jersey Audubon Society, Cumberland County Improvement Authority, Association of New Jersey Environmental Commissions, National Wild and Scenic Rivers System and the Bodacious. We offer a 3-hour sunset cruise with refreshments. Passengers speak with martin experts and naturalists identify points of ecological and cultural interest, all during the dog days of August when the heat and humidity drag you down. Nothing is more relaxing than a boat ride at sunset. Sit back, relax and enjoy the company of people with similar interests, all while taking in thousands of martins putting on a show that captivates the imagination. Most years we position a flatbed trailer onshore for those unable to make the boat trip. There is also a boat ramp where paddlers and boaters can launch their personal craft. If the martins stage near the bridge, the ramp provides easy access to view the roost.

Most of the time I view the roost from either the Mauricetown Causeway (County Route 670) or from the Bodacious. Both offer different perspectives. The Causeway has a sidewalk on the south side, which provides a somewhat intimidating but rewarding view of the entire river corridor. One gets a different perspective of the magnitude of the roosting area. Martins fly in from all directions, north across the Delaware Bay from Delaware and Maryland, from Pennsylvania, New England, New York, and Canada. Virtually any martins in the northeast or mid-Atlantic coastal states probably use this staging area. As you set up the spotting scope and also glass the skies with your binoculars, you observe the entire corridor and see martins flying to the staging area no matter what direction you glass. As the skies darken, the activity level increases and one gets a much better idea of the enormity of the roost. While one needs to view the entire river corridor to appreciate the size of the roost, being on the Bodacious is still the best.

Added Bonus

Many of the people you meet on the boat want to start a martin colony or need technical assistance to address problems at their site. I hand out my card to many people on board. Conducting on-site visits and giving site-specific recommendations increase the chances of having a successful martin colony. Interestingly, one of my planned site visits will include a trip to southeastern Pennsylvania. This will support ongoing efforts by the PMCA's recent establishment of the Pennsylvania Purple Martin Working Group, intended to restore declining martin populations within the state. I also anticipate establishing six new bluebird trails in southern New Jersey, all from meeting people on the Bodacious.

For those who think the Barnum and Bailey Circus is the Greatest Show on Earth, think again. We martin enthusiasts believe the Greatest Show on Earth is the Purple Martin Spectacular on the Maurice River, Mauricetown, Cumberland County, New Jersey. 

Allen is a wildlife biologist retired from the US Fish and Wildlife Service. Besides being an outspoken proponent for proper management, he participates in the PMCA's martin mentor program and was selected their 2002 Purple Martin Landlord of the Year. In 2011 he spearheaded efforts to establish the New Jersey Bluebird Society, is their current President and now devotes much of his time to benefiting bluebirds.