

Purple martins put on a sky-high spectacle

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Submitted photo

PURPLE MARTINS filled the sky during a roost event in Erie, Pa.

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Purple martins, members of the swallow family, are native songbirds. East of the Rocky Mountains, they now rely entirely on human-provided housing. In late summer, they gather in massive flocks — called migratory roosts — to rest, socialize, and eat before migrating to South America.

With a little creative thinking, you can attend a martin roost and witness something unforgettable. I've had the pleasure twice, in two different states. One trip was completely spontaneous; the other took me to Texas.

My first roost visit began one afternoon when I spotted the purple martin Conservation Association's invitation to a special roost event in Erie — that very evening. I called my wife at work and said, "Don't plan anything tonight. I'll pick you up there!" She couldn't believe we were driving three hours

each way to see something we weren't even sure how to find. I promised snacks, lawn chairs, and a good time.

We found the South Pier and joined dozens of people hoping to see the estimated 10,000–12,000 martins roosting there. A local TV crew was on site. My wife was amused when I recognized — and literally chased down — Joe Siegrist, president and CEO of the PMCA, just to thank him. He smiled and said, "Ron, you won't be disappointed. In a few minutes, the sky will be filled with martins."

For a while, we stared at an empty sky. Then the crowd began pointing and shouting, "Here they come!" Suddenly, the sky turned black with birds, swooping lower and lower. It was breathtaking. We laughed the whole way home, certain it had been worth every mile.

My second roost visit came in July 2022 near Round Rock, Texas. This one had been in the works for years. When I was trying to establish a mar-

tin colony, my son mentioned a huge roost near Round Rock that attracted as many as 300,000 birds. In 2019, he moved to Austin — just minutes away from the site.

During a family trip to Austin in 2022, we visited the roost two nights in a row. By then, the site had shifted to a shopping area known as Capital Plaza. Although martins usually avoid trees, they packed every branch around the parking lot. When they arrived, the sky resembled a swirling black cloud. I couldn't imagine how so many birds could fly so close without colliding.

When they passed overhead, you could feel the wind from their wings. I wandered closer, staring upward, until my daughter yelled, "Dad, I know you're in your glory, but close your mouth! These

birds are making plenty of splats, and I've already been hit twice!" I laughed and said, "I'm not worried — they like me!" Then I wisely shut my mouth.

Thousands of martins perched shoulder to shoulder in each tree. We took photos and videos, but nothing captured the thrill of being there. As we drove away, my family agreed: whether in Pennsylvania or Texas, seeing a purple martin roost is an experience you'll never forget.

Ron Alsop is a purple martin landlord in Penn Run. He enjoys martins and likes to lecture and write about his eight-year pursuit of becoming a landlord. The Naturally columns are brought to you each month by the Indiana Gazette and Friends of White's Woods to showcase the wonders of nature in our area.