



tr

20 | tropicalia

Or



Above, the beyond So



PHOTOS BY PHIL AVRAM, SPECIAL TO THE NEWS-PRESS

ROLL OUT WELCOME MAT FOR THE PURPLE MARTIN

BY AMY BENNETT WILLIAMS
awilliams@news-press.com

The landlord/tenant relationship is often a tense, touchy thing — unless, that is, the tenants happen to be of the flying, bug-eating variety.

The purple martin may be just a little slip of a bird, but it inspires huge admiration and devotion among those who house them.

"I never mind telling people about purple martins because I love them so much, and they have brought me so much pleasure," says retired pediatrician Marty Valiant of LaBelle. "I grew up outside Cleveland on the shores of Lake Erie, and our local lakeside park had several martin apartment houses. Even as a child, I was fascinated by them and would often sit at a nearby picnic table and watch them — and listen to them as well. They are very communal and chatter a lot."

That's not all: These sleek, compact migratory birds, the largest members of the swallow family, eat only flying insects. And their hunting flights are nothing short of breathtakingly acrobatic.

"They're the most incredible flyers — the F-16s of the bird," says martin fan Cheryl Anderson of Cape Coral, who points out that they also return to their home base faithfully year after year to raise their babies. Their preferred nest sites are often specially made purple martin houses, which can range from elaborate, castle-style



PHIL AVRAM, SPECIAL TO THE NEWS-PRESS

dwelling to hollowed-out, white-painted gourds — but almost always human-created. "Ninety-nine percent of purple martins use nests people provide," Anderson says.

Sound far-fetched? It's not; the venerable Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology backs her up: "In eastern North America it has nested almost exclusively in nest boxes for more than 100 years."

Anderson has two colonies on her street and helped build a natural gourd colony at Cape Coral's Rotary Park as well. She likes nothing more than to share her love for them with others, pointing out that the feeling seems to be mutual.

"They're really friendly and genuinely like to be near people," she says.

Plus, they're fastidiously clean. "There's never a mess around

their houses," she says. "When their babies poop, it comes out in a little sack and the parents carry it away and drop it into open water" — a strategy designed to hide the family's presence from predators, but a delightful side benefit for their human landlords, she says.

To attract them, Anderson says, it's best to place the house in the air in an open area. The end of a dock is ideal, she says, since the birds seek out places that can't conceal predators.

Purple martins nest in the spring, usually around March, and raise one brood a year. Once the babies can fly, the families leave the nests to spend their days eating bugs on the wing as they prepare for their winter migration to South America. At night, they gather in huge communal roosts, often in urban areas.

Hendry Street in downtown Fort Myers is a favorite haunt, a fact that The Bar Association's owner, Ron Kopko, has capitalized on, hosting an annual Purple Martin Festival in June. During martin season — now through August, he gives away free bird whistles and offers a free drink to the first patron each night to get "bombed" by one of the martins. He says people love to sit outside around dusk and watch the birds' acrobatic flight.

"They do this incredible dance in the air before they land," Kopko says. "A group of them looks like a black tornado and it's really pretty spectacular."