

Purple Martins: a Sacramento specialty

Purple Martins, the largest swallows in North America, are found throughout much of the United States and into Canada during the summer. They are uncommon and declining in the West. A remnant of the Central Valley population persists in Sacramento. They arrive near the end of March, and generally nest in “weep holes” under freeway overpasses. Nesting season is over by the end of July, and by early August, they head toward their wintering grounds in South America.

Purple Martins can generally be found in the following locations in and near downtown Sacramento:

- 20th Street between X and W Streets (Site 1)
- Old Town Sacramento, particularly east and north of the Railroad Museum—125 I Street (Site 2)
- 29th and 30th Streets between R and S Streets, particularly near the Light Rail Station (Site 3)

Mid-June and into July is probably the best time to observe them as parents will be very busy feeding young.

In recent years, researchers have been carefully monitoring Sacramento’s Purple Martins. Formerly, they nested in tree cavities, and it is thought that the loss of riparian forest coupled with competition from European Starlings has nearly eliminated them as a local breeder. Their unique adaptation to overpasses has allowed them to persist, though they still face many threats, including vehicle collisions and predation from feral cats when they collect nesting material. Luckily, it is still easy to see these beautiful birds in the Sacramento area and well worth the time.

The Sacramento Audubon Society has become a sponsor of the Purple Martin Project, coordinated by Dan Airola, by funding the expenses of participating volunteers monitoring Sacramento’s Purple Martins. The ongoing study and the recommendations that result from it will help conserve this vulnerable population.

Directions: For Site 1, exit Highway 50/Capital City Freeway at 15th Street (0.8 mile east of Interstate 5). Proceed east on X Street for 0.4 mile and turn left on 20th Street. For Site 2, exit Interstate 5 at J Street, 0.8 mile north of Highway 50. Turn right on J Street, left on 5th Street,

and left on I Street. There is short-term, metered parking on the streets and a parking garage at the entrance to Old Sacramento. For Site 3, exit Highway 50 at 34th Street (2.3 miles east of Interstate 5). Turn left at 34th Street and left on S Street.

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