



Staten Island Advance

The purple martins have arrived at Staten Island's Lemon Creek Park



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Upcoming birding walks

In addition to visiting the purple martin colony, you can participate in these free walks in Clove Lakes Park to look for warblers and other migrants.

Wednesday, 10 a.m.

Meet Ed Johnson at the Martlings Avenue Bridge for his Mid-Week Bird Walk.

Sunday, 8 a.m.

Meet Howie Fisher on Royal Oaks Road near the corner closer to Rice Avenue for a walk sponsored by Friends of Blue Heron Park.

STATEN ISLAND, N.Y. -- Although they respond to primal instincts triggered by the season's changing light and take advantage of unpredictable weather conditions, State Island's purple martins have a knack for arriving in a timely fashion for that dreaded human deadline -- April 15.

This year is no exception.

Just as we were preparing this story about the imminent return of these large swallows, we saw Catherine Barron's post on [SINaturaList](#):

4 purple martins at the Lemon Creek Colony at around 11:45 a.m.

There were at least 2 adult males. The martins were going to the hanging [gourd] on pole # 2 and the house on pole # 8.

Around 1:45 p.m. at the Arden Avenue Colony there were at least 6 male purple martins going to 2 of the 3 houses.

Their arrival is a welcome relief. The inky, iridescent birds winter in Brazil and migrate some 4,000 miles to return to their digs in [Lemon Creek Park](#) and the privately maintained Arden Avenue colony.

North America's largest species of swallow, the purple martin has a somewhat unusual dependence on humans who provide the finicky travelers with aerial "bungalows" in which to build their nests and shelter their next generation. It's an arrangement that began with the Lenape Indians.

Established in 1953 by Howard Cleaves, the Lemon Creek Purple Martin Colony has a combination of little apartment-like houses and more naturally-shaped gourds.

Maintaining the colony takes a concerted effort by the human caretakers. Detritus from other birds, such as starlings and sparrows that find them attractive too, must be cleaned out and painting done where needed. Weeds where cats and other predators can take cover also have to be cleared out.

"We have to be done by tax day," was Gloria Deppe's rallying cry to volunteers who helped prepare the little houses. [A Woman of Achievement, Mrs. Deppe](#) acted as the "landlord" of the bird colony for 30 years. [She died in 2012.](#)

Volunteers with the Staten Island Museum and Protectors of Pine Oak Woods have spent hours over two recent weekends spiffing things up at the beach colony. They spread wood chips provided by the NYC Department of Parks & Recreation, around the base of the houses to help prevent weed growth

"The return of purple martins is something that we look forward to all winter. People should feel free to visit the colony anytime during the spring and early summer to see the martins catch their favorite food (flying insects), and to watch them raise their young, who will return to this colony next spring," said Ed Johnson, director of science at the Museum.

Although their arrival is a victory after an arduous journey, survival is not guaranteed. The acrobatic fliers are insectivores with a particular taste for dragonflies. In 2003, the colony took a devastating hit when temperatures plunged and the insects the birds depend on did not emerge. Without food to keep them going, the birds froze to death.

Two years ago, the Staten Island Museum's Teen Environmental Club and Nature Section renovated the colony, cleaning up and installing some new houses. The arrival of the first males to scope out nesting arrangements for the following females is a good sign that the birds have found the accommodations agreeable.