

California Wildlife Habitat Relationships System
California Department of Fish and Wildlife
California Interagency Wildlife Task Group

PURPLE MARTIN

Progne subis

Family: HIRUNDINIDAE
B338

Order: PASSERIFORMES

Class: AVES

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DISTRIBUTION, ABUNDANCE, AND SEASONALITY

An uncommon to rare, local summer resident in a variety of wooded, low-elevation habitats throughout the state; a rare migrant in spring and fall, absent in winter. Uses valley foothill and montane hardwood, valley foothill and montane hardwood-conifer, and riparian habitats. Also occurs in coniferous habitats, including closed-cone pine-cypress, ponderosa pine, Douglas-fir, and redwood. In the south, now only a rare and local breeder on the coast and in interior mountain ranges, with few breeding localities (Garrett and Dunn 1981). Absent from higher desert regions except as a rare migrant. In the north, an uncommon to rare local breeder on the coast and inland to Modoc and Lassen Co's. (McCaskie et al. 1979, Airola 1980). Absent from higher slopes of the Sierra Nevada. Inhabits open forests, woodlands, and riparian areas in breeding season. Found in a variety of open habitats during migration, including grassland, wet meadow, and fresh emergent wetland, usually near water.

SPECIFIC HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

Feeding: Hawks insects on long, gliding flights 30-60 m (100-200 ft) above the ground (Airola 1980). Occasionally forages on the ground for ants and other insects (Bent 1942).

Cover: Woodlands and low-elevation coniferous forest of Douglas-fir, ponderosa pine, and Monterey pine provide cover. Often nests in tall, old trees near a body of water. Also nests occasionally in residential areas.

Reproduction: Nests in old woodpecker cavity mostly, sometimes in human-made structure; in nesting box, under bridge, in culvert. Nest often located in a tall, old, isolated tree or snag in open forest or woodland (Dawson 1923). Not as likely to use nest box in California as in the eastern U.S.

Water: Drinks and bathes on the wing (Ehrlich et al. 1988).

Pattern: Frequents old-growth, multi-layered, open forest and woodland with snags in breeding season. Forages over riparian areas, forest, and woodland. Found in a variety of open habitats in migration.

SPECIES LIFE HISTORY

Activity Patterns: Yearlong, diurnal activity.

Seasonal Movements/Migration: Arrives from South America in late March. Numbers during migration and through the summer remain small. Departs by late September.

Home Range: No data found.

Territory: In Montana, nest hole entrance was defended, and male defended female away from nest (Allen and Nice 1952).

Reproduction: Nests from April into August, with peak activity in June. Pair nests colonially or singly, depending on nest site availability. Lays 3-8 eggs; average 4-5. May raise 2 broods some years. Altricial young tended by both parents, and leave nest at 24-31 days (Harrison 1978).

Niche: Eggs and adults perhaps not often preyed upon.

Comments: Numbers have declined markedly in recent decades because of loss of riparian habitat, removal of snags, and competition for nest cavities from European starlings and house sparrows. Eliminated from much of its previous range in California (Remsen 1978).

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