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Coastal Carolina Purple Martin Society forms to protect birds and motorists during an annual Dare County spectacle

After three years of watching and protecting the amazing purple martins roost near Manns Harbor in Dare County, advocates for the birds have formed a non-profit charitable and educational organization to continue conservation activities. Incorporated in December, the CCPMS mission is “to protect the annual roost of purple martins at the William B. Umstead Memorial Bridge in Manns Harbor, N.C., and to promote through public education the conservation of these migratory birds throughout the coastal plain region of North Carolina.”

Among the natural attractions that make the Outer Banks famous is this fascinating phenomenon where some 100,000 birds roost under the bridge from mid-June to mid-September. The spectacle has occurred here for at least the past 30 years.

Why the Old Manns Harbor Bridge? Because it is a low structure situated over water. Martins prefer to roost where there are no land dwelling predators to contend with. Abundant insects made available by the vast agricultural fields, national wildlife refuges and wetlands of the coastal plain support this large population of pre-migratory birds.

Martins are welcomed back each spring by caring “landlords” who provide them with nesting quarters. The birds return to the same colony each year. After nesting, martins travel up to 150 miles from their breeding colonies to reach the bridge. The roost is located in Manns Harbor, but the birds comprising the roost travel back and forth throughout the coastal plain: Outer Banks to Williamston, Elizabeth City to Belhaven.

Arriving by the thousands at sunset, the birds sleep under the western end of the bridge, on its exposed I-beams, girders and cables. At sunrise they depart to feed for the day, building up fat stores in preparation for their 2,600 mile migration back to Brazil. Because the birds are so numerous at this exceptional roost, their morning departure can be seen on Doppler Radar.

Because traffic flows across the bridge, thousands of martins are killed by impact with vehicles throughout the summer. Their bodies cover the bridge surface and are thrown into the water below. Motorists are endangered when they are distracted by hundreds of birds flying into and around their vehicles, even when traveling at very slow speeds.

On Jan. 18, the Dare County Commissioners unanimously approved a resolution that is expected to set in motion measures to protect both the birds and motorists. The CCPMS recommended, and the commissioners agreed, to erect safety-zone signs on either end of the roosting area, with a flashing light that directs drivers to slow down for the short stretch of bridge where the birds fly during two hours at both dawn and sunset. The signs would not be needed from October to May.

The Society also plans a set of educational activities before and during the roosting period this year.

Membership in the CCPMS helps supports these activities. The organization’s tax-exempt status is pending. Membership costs \$25 for the January-December calendar year. Members will receive regular communications about the roost and the birds and may participate in CCPMS activities. For membership information, contact CCPMS.

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PURPLE MARTIN FACTS

- Purple martins are social colony nesters 100% dependant on humans for reproductive success.
- Purple martins are our largest swallow species measuring 7-8 inches from beak to tail.
- Martins are beneficial birds eating only aerial insects caught in flight.