

Flora & Fauna

History of Purple Martins

Twelve thousand years ago, Purple Martins were a very different bird than they are today. Back then, martins nested in the abandoned nesting chambers of woodpeckers, or in other natural cavities in dead trees or cliffs. Today, east of the Rockies, martins nest only in human-supplied housing: either in special "martin houses," or in natural or artificial gourds.

Why did Purple Martins stop nesting in their ancestral ways? Perhaps by accident, Native Americans discovered that martins could be lured into their villages by hanging up gourds with holes cut in their sides.

First, a pair of martins probably tried nesting in a dipper gourd hung near a pond by natives as a drinking utensil. When the Native Americans discovered this, they may have been amused and started hanging other gourds for martins around their campsites. Over thousands of bird generations, martins gradually gave up their ancestral nesting ways.

Because they were nesting near humans (where predators are scarcer) and nesting in chambers far larger than woodpecker cavities, these martins were able to lay more eggs and successfully raise more young to fledging age. It would have been adaptive for the surviving young from these gourd nests to seek them out for nesting sites when they became breeders the following year.

Concurrently, Native Americans may have discovered other benefits, uses and pleasures from Purple Martins. For instance, documents from the 18th and 19th centuries suggest that these early Americans attracted martins to their villages because they functioned like scarecrows, chasing crows away from their corn patches, and vultures away from their meats and hides hung out to dry. They also consumed huge numbers of flies, mosquitoes and other bugs drawn to village. The mutually beneficial relationship established then still exists today.

It's fun to speculate what additional benefits Native Americans may have discovered. Perhaps martins were like alarm clocks, since they begin singing so early and regularly in the morning. Maybe they were like both radios and televisions, since they sing such pleasant songs and their behaviors are so fun to watch. They certainly would have been like calendars, since every phase of their annual cycle (from arrival, nest-building, egg-laying, hatching, and departure) is done on a regular schedule. They may have been like watchdogs, since they are notorious for giving alarm calls when predators or strangers approach.

Perhaps for some (or all) of these reasons, a cultural tradition began and other native tribes took up the habit of hanging gourds for martins. Gradually, over time, more and more martins chose gourds for nesting, and fewer and fewer chose natural cavities. When the European colonists arrived, they also adopted the custom of hanging gourds for Purple Martins, but they also supplemented them with ceramic gourds and wooden martin houses. By the early 20th century, the entire eastern race of Purple Martins nested only in human-supplied housing.

Today, east of the Rockies, Purple Martins are the only bird species totally dependent on humans for supplying them with nesting sites. If humans were to stop supplying martins with homes, they would likely disappear as a breeding bird in eastern North America.

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Cleaning Corner

Keeping Kids' Toys Clean

There may be a few surprises lurking in your child's stuffed animal, bath toy or train set. Dust mites and molds can trigger allergies and asthma, and infectious germs spread viral illnesses. The majority of cold viruses are transmitted on objects and hands. Here's how to keep allergies, asthma, colds and the flu at bay:

Choose toys carefully. Look for washable toys and throw out items that won't come clean. Where possible, avoid porous, stuffed or otherwise difficult-to-scrub items.

Wash 'em regularly. Scrub toys once a month or at least when toys are visibly dirty. Throw toys into the top rack of a dishwasher or the washing machine, or hand wash them in dish soap and water.

Blast germs when required. Disinfect toys and other surfaces if you, your child or a visiting playmate has been ill. A bleach-water solution or non-aerosol disinfectant such as Lysol should work.

Give stuffed toys the deep freeze. Put stuffed toys in a plastic covering and freeze them for three to five hours once a week. This kills most living dust mites.

Keep washing those hands. Washing hands before kids play with their home toys can keep them from spreading bacteria around.

September

- 1781 The Valley of Smokes is settled by 44 newcomers; ultimately, it is renamed Los Angeles
- 1833 The New York Sun newspaper hires its first newsboy, Barney Flaherty
- 1869 The rickshaw is invented by a Baptist minister living in Yokohama, Japan
- 1885 The first buffet cafeteria opens in New York City
- 1921 Margaret Gorman of Washington D.C. picked the first Miss America from eight contestants in Atlantic City, NJ
- 1945 Ruben Fine wins four rapid chess games in a row wearing a blindfold
- 1950 A St. Ann Bay, Nova Scotia fisherman lands a 997-pound tuna
- 1959 The first Barbie doll goes on sale
- 1974 The nation is shocked when Gerald Ford pardons Richard Nixon of all federal crimes

Health Tips: Healthy Eating Tips

You may have heard terms like “calories,” “empty calories,” “trans fats” and other health related words being used quite a lot today. But do you know what they are exactly? Do you know why they’re so bad for you? Where can you find them and how do you avoid them? Here’s a quick guide to navigating these terms and improving your diet.

A **calorie** is a unit of energy. We tend to associate calories with food, but they apply to anything containing energy. For example, a gallon of gasoline contains about 31,000,000 calories.

Human beings need energy to survive – to breathe, to pump blood, to move – and we acquire this energy from food. The average woman needs between 1,400-1,600 calories a day just to function at rest. The more active you are, the more calories you need to consume. (The more you drive your car, the more gas you need!) So keep an eye on your caloric intake – too many calories won’t give you more energy, just a bigger belly! Keep in mind, too, that all calories are not created equal.

The term, “**empty calories**,” describes foods high in calories but low in nutritional value (also known as junk food!), lacking health-promoting micronutrients such as: vitamins, minerals, fiber and antioxidants. Some examples of foods containing mostly empty calories are: French fries, fried chicken, chips, candy, soda, crackers, cookies and white bread. French fries can contain up to 570 calories with a whopping 30 grams of total fat and 8 grams of trans fat! Soda contains about 130 calories as well as additives and colorings. Beer, wine and all other alcoholic beverages are empty calorie culprits, too. A can of beer contains about 150 calories from sugar and not much else. In addition, calories from alcohol tend to be stored as fat in the abdomen (leading to a “beer belly”).

Trans fat is found in any packaged good that contains “partially-hydrogenated vegetable oils,” “hydrogenated vegetable oils” or “shortening.” Read the ingredients on a package before you buy it. If any of these terms are among the first few listed, put it back and find a healthier substitute.

Before the invention of trans fatty acids, we cooked food with lard, palm oil or butter. Substances high in saturated fat. Researchers found that saturated fat increases LDL cholesterol (the bad cholesterol), which may increase the risk of heart disease.

So, manufacturers started to use healthier vegetable oils in their food production. As liquid, vegetable oils are not stable in heat and can go rancid easily, scientists began to “hydrogenate” liquid oils so that they can withstand better in food production process and provide a better shelf life. As a result of hydrogenation, trans fatty acids are formed.

So what should you eat?

1. You don’t have to give up all the foods you love – often just the way they’re prepared. Instead of deep frying, use other methods of cooking. For instance, have a baked potato with skin instead of fries, or a baked, skinless chicken breast in stead of fried chicken.
2. Avoid sweetened drinks and canned drinks. Even diet sodas. Just because it says diet on the label doesn’t mean it’s good for you!
3. Try whole grains instead of refined grains. Whole grains are packed with beneficial fiber and antioxidants. Have a slice of whole-wheat bread instead of white bread. Have a bowl of whole-grain breakfast cereal instead of corn flakes or frosted cereal.
4. Snack on fruits! Fruit is Nature’s candy. Slice up some apple wedges and dip them in low-fat yogurt to get additional calcium and protein.

Kid Corner: Avoiding Over-Scheduling Kids’ Activities

Finding the balance between scheduling activities for your kids and over-scheduling them can be tough. For some families, kids may be driving the schedule because they want to participate in all the activities their friends are doing and don’t want to feel left out. Teens often feel pressure to boost their roster of activities to get into the college of their choice. Some parents may feel the need to sign their kids up for one more class or team for fear that their children may be missing something the other kids are getting.

Of course, organized activities and sports are beneficial for kids. They foster social skills and provide opportunities for play and exercise. They promote cultural enrichment and teach sportsmanship, self-discipline and conflict resolution. Most of all, they’re fun! The key is keeping them that way, and making sure that kids - and their parents - aren’t becoming overwhelmed.

An indicator of over-scheduling during the grade-school years would be difficulty getting a child to wake up in the morning because they’re not getting enough sleep. Irritability or frantic crying over an activity may also be warning signs as is an inability to amuse themselves or be autonomous. Family life can also suffer when too many people are running in too many directions. As a result, some families rarely eat dinner together and parents and kids may not be taking the time to stay connected.

The solution is to schedule things in moderation and choose activities with your child’s age, temperament, interests and abilities in mind. If something’s too advanced, the experience may be frustrating. If it isn’t engaging, your child will probably be bored. And if your child doesn’t want to do it in the first place, he or she may do it only to please you, which defeats the whole purpose.

You can set reasonable limits on extracurricular activities and help make them more enjoyable for both you and your child. Here are some simple suggestions:

- **Agree on some ground rules before you sign up.** For instance, plan to play one sport per season, or limit activities to two afternoons or evenings during the week.
- **Try to carpool with other parents to make life easier.**
- **Before you say yes, make sure your child knows how much time is required for an activity.** Does your child realize that soccer practice is twice a week, right after school until dinnertime? Then there’s the weekly game, too. Will his or her homework suffer?
- **Try to balance activities for all of your children - and yourself.** Don’t forget to take time for yourself, to do the things you enjoy and to spend time together as a family.
- **Create family time.** Make a plan so that everyone can be home for dinner at the same time - even if it means eating a little later. Make sure to schedule family fun time, too, whether it’s playing a board game together or going on bike ride or hike.
- **Set priorities.** School should come first. If your child is having a hard time keeping up academically, drop an activity.
- **Know when to draw the line and say no.** If your child is already doing a lot and *really* wants to participate in another activity, talk about what other activity or activities need to be dropped to make the desired one happen.

If you think your child is overscheduled, sit down together and decide where you can cut back. Consider helping your child create time to blow off some steam. Riding a bike, taking a walk, playing a game, listening to music or just doing nothing for a while will give your child some much-needed rest. And never forget how important it is for kids to simply get together to play!

Makeovers are all the rage – from your home to your hairstyle – so why not brown bag lunch?

Before: PB&J Sandwich, Chips, Two Cookies and Bottled Water

After: PB&J with Granny Smith Apples, Melon Balls and Strawberries, 1% Skim Milk

The peanut butter and jelly sandwich is the king of all lunches. The remade PB&J features peanut butter, thinly sliced Granny Smith apples on whole wheat bread. You can also do peanut butter, raisins and banana on a whole-wheat pita.

Before: Ham & Cheese on White, Baby Carrots and Ranch, Pudding Cup and a Juice

After: Ham & Cheese Roll-ups with Dipping Sauce, Orange Slices and Bottled Water

To make the roll-ups, spread softened, light cream cheese over an 8-inch whole-wheat flour tortilla. Top with shredded carrots, pre-shredded reduced fat Cheddar cheese and thinly sliced lean deli ham. Roll up tightly and slice in half. Serve with honey mustard, barbecue sauce or hummus.

Before: Turkey and Provolone on White, Trail Mix, Chocolate Milk

After: Turkey All Wrapped Up, Peach Slices, Bottled Water

To make the wraps, pile thinly sliced roasted turkey, pre-shredded reduced-fat Mexican blend cheese, salsa and ripe avocado slices on an 8-inch whole-wheat flour tortilla. Roll up tightly and slice in half. To keep the avocado from browning, wrap the sandwich tightly in plastic wrap.

Before: Submarine Sandwich, Fruit Cup, Pudding Cup, Capri-Sun

After: Healthy Hero, Apple and Banana Slices, Pudding Cup, 1% Skim Milk

To make the sandwich, first combine baby spinach with light or regular Italian dressing. Spread honey mustard on a whole-wheat sub roll, halved. Layer with spinach, roast beef, reduced-fat provolone cheese, roasted turkey and sandwich-sliced dill pickles and sliced tomato. Place the remaining roll half on top. Slice and serve.

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... Upholstery Talk...

Talk about ironic: We'd never take a pass on washing our bed sheets. But what about our furniture? Some of us spend as much time crashed on the couch as we do in bed. We sit, nap and eat there. We even invite the pets to join us.

Despite the fact that many of us log an overabundance of sofa time, equally as many of us will admit that we're not nearly as good about regular cleanings when it comes to our couches. This article may change that because we're going to reveal a big secret: When you ignore regular upholstery cleanings, you're doing exactly what furniture manufacturers want you to do. Neglect having your upholstered furniture sanitized on a regular basis and the fabric will wear out fast. Before you know it, you're out shopping for a new couch or a new recliner. As we said, that's exactly what furniture makers are banking on.

If you'd rather not be out shopping for furniture more than you or your budget would like, take time to care for it by getting rid of small spots, stains and spills as quickly as they happen, then make regular appointments with your carpet care contractor to ser-vice your furniture. He'll know where to look for the manufacturers "secret code" (the tag that IDs fabric as cleanable by (S) solvent, (S/W) solvent and water, (W) water or (X) "can't be cleaned"). Because your carpet tech is a professional, he may even know of new products on the market that can tackle fabric in the X category.

Regardless of the cleaning method recommended, you can be sure your contractor will test the material in an inconspicuous place, then give you the whole story on what it will take to clean that particular piece of furniture. In the interim, vacuuming sofas with the same regularity as you tackle your carpet will go a long way toward removing the everyday grime that "magically appears" on your upholstered pieces.



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What Car Odors Tell You about Your Car

Some car problems give you no warning whatsoever. But fortunately, other problems announce themselves with definite odors. Here is a list of car odors that may be no big deal, or may require that you put down the keys, call a tow truck and let a professional handle your auto care needs.

Burning coolant. You could have a blown head gasket, which causes coolant to mix with your gas. If this is the case, you may notice thick, sweet smelling, whitish smoke coming from the tailpipe. At this point, you may need professional auto care, so see your mechanic.

Exhaust. You may have a leak in your exhaust system, like a hole in your muffler, tailpipe or exhaust manifold or exhaust pipe. Once again, it may be time for professional auto care.

Burning trash. Is your engine burning oil? If your car is older, you may have worn piston rings. These rings seal gaps between pistons and engine cylinders. If they wear down, oil can leak out of the cylinder walls. The oil burns and exits the tailpipe in smelly, blackish puffs of smoke. Don't take chances. See your auto care technician.

Hot oil. If oil is leaking, it may boil onto the engine components and bake. Start by checking to see if your oil cap is loose.

Fresh asphalt. This could be a sign of an overheated engine. Something is melting down, like plastic parts under the hood. If that happens, a chain reaction occurs making the engine hotter and hotter.

Raw gas. Is the gas cap loose? Did you overfill the tank? If neither of these is possible, don't risk starting the engine. You may have a severed gas line or leaky fuel-injection system. You're going to need professional auto care, so your best bet is to have it towed to a technician you trust.

Rotten eggs. This could indicate a plugged or damaged catalytic converter or a too-rich air/fuel mixture. Call your mechanic; this is a sign of electrical malfunction.

Burnt toast. A burnt toast smell could mean the electrical insulation is burning. Again, call your mechanic for a professional auto care opinion. You may have an electrical malfunction.

Burning plastic. This may be as simple as a plastic bag caught under the car. Use a flashlight to check. If that's the case, you'll probably just have to wait for the plastic to burn off.

Burning rubber. A rubber hose may be resting on the exhaust manifold, or a belt may be shredded by a jammed pulley. If a belt is loose or worn, it is usually indicated by a squeal. Turn off your engine and inspect the hoses and belts. Replace as necessary. The smell could be from your brakes, too. After a long, steep descent, it's not uncommon to smell your brakes. Try using a lower gear. If you smell your brakes during normal driving, get them checked immediately.

General Odor. Sometimes a car just gets smelly. You can solve the problem by tucking dryer sheets into the nooks and crannies of the interior of the car.