

Plants for Wild Birds

Seven types of plants are important as bird habitat:

Conifers

Conifers are evergreen trees and shrubs that include pines, spruces, firs, arborvitae, junipers, cedars, and yews. These plants are important as escape cover, winter shelter and summer nesting sites. Some also provide sap, fruits and seeds.

Grasses and Legumes

Grasses and legumes can provide cover for ground nesting birds—but only if the area is not mowed during the nesting season. Some grasses and legumes provide seeds as well. Native prairie grasses are becoming increasingly popular for landscaping purposes.

Nectar-producing Plants

Nectar-producing plants are very popular for attracting hummingbirds and orioles. Flowers with tubular red corollas are especially attractive to hummingbirds. Other trees, shrubs, vines and flowers also can provide nectar for hummingbirds.

Summer-fruiting Plants

This category includes plants that produce fruits or berries from May through August. In the summer these plants can attract brown thrashers, catbirds, robins, thrushes, waxwings, woodpeckers, orioles, cardinals, towhees and grosbeaks. Examples of summer-fruiting plants are various species of cherry, chokecherry, honeysuckle, raspberry, serviceberry, blackberry, blueberry, grape, mulberry, plum and elderberry.

Fall-fruiting Plants

This landscape component includes shrubs and vines whose fruits ripen in the fall. These foods are important both for migratory birds which build up fat reserves before migration and as a food source for nonmigratory species that need to enter the winter season in good physical condition. Fall-fruiting plants include dogwoods, mountain ash, winter-berries, cottoneasters and buffalo-berries.

Winter-fruiting Plants

Winter-fruiting plants are those whose fruits remain attached to the plants long after they first become ripe in the fall. Many are not palatable until they have frozen and thawed many times. Examples are glossy black chokecherry, Siberian and “red splendor” crabapple, snowberry, bittersweet, sumacs, American highbush cranberry, eastern and European wahoo, Virginia creeper, and Chinaberry.

Nut and Acorn Plants

These include oaks, hickories, buckeyes, chestnuts, butternuts, walnuts and hazels. A variety of birds, such as jays, woodpeckers and titmice, eat the meats of broken nuts and acorns. These plants also contribute to good nesting habitat.

How to Get Started

Think of this project as landscaping for birds. Your goal will be to plant an assortment of trees, shrubs and flowers that will attract birds. If you plan carefully it can be inexpensive and fun for the whole family. The best way to get started is to follow these guidelines:

Set Your Priorities

Decide what types of birds you wish to attract, then build your plan around the needs of those species. Talk to friends and neighbors to find out what kinds of birds frequent your area. Attend a local bird club meeting and talk to local birdwatchers about how they have attracted birds to their yards.

Use Native Plants When Possible

Check with the botany department of a nearby college or university or with your state’s natural heritage program for lists of trees, shrubs, and wildflowers native to your area. Use this list as a starting point for your landscape plan. These plants are naturally adapted to the climate of your area and are a good long-term investment. Many native plants are both beautiful for landscaping purposes and excellent for birds. If you include nonnative plant species in your plan, be sure they are not considered “invasive pests” by plant experts. Check out the bird books in your local library.

Draw a Map of Your Property

Draw a map of your property to scale using graph paper. Identify buildings, sidewalks, power lines, buried cables, fences, septic tank fields, trees, shrubs and patios. Consider how your plan relates to your neighbor’s property—will the tree you plant shade out the neighbor’s vegetable garden? Identify and map sunny or shady sites, low or wet sites, sandy sites, and native plants that will be left in place.

Also identify special views that you wish to enhance—areas for pets, benches, picnics, storage, playing, sledding, vegetable gardens and paths.

Get Your Soil Tested

Get your soil tested by your local garden center, county extension agent or soil conservation service. Find out what kinds of soil you have and then find out if your soils have nutrient or organic deficiencies that fertilization or addition of compost can correct. The soils you have will help determine the plants which can be included in your landscaping plan.

Review the Seven Plant Habitat Components

Review the seven plant components described previously. Which components are already present? Which ones are missing? Remember that you are trying to provide food and cover through all four seasons. Develop a list of plants that you think will provide the missing habitat components.

Talk to Resource Experts

Review this plant list with landscaping resource experts who can match your ideas with your soil types, soil drainage and the plants available through state or private nurseries. People at the nearby arboretum can help with your selections. At an arboretum you can also see what many plants look like. Talk with local bird clubs, the members of which probably are knowledgeable about landscaping for birds.

Develop Your Planting Plan

Sketch on your map the plants you wish to add. Draw trees to a scale that represents three-fourths of their mature width, and shrubs at their full mature width. This will help you calculate how many trees and shrubs you need. There is a tendency to include so many trees that eventually your yard will be mostly shaded. Be sure to leave open sunny sites where flowers and shrubs can thrive. Decide how much money you can spend and the time span of your project. Don't try to do too much at once. You might try a five-year development plan.

Implement Your Plan

Finally, go to it! Begin your plantings and include your entire family so they can all feel they are helping wildlife. Document your plantings on paper and by photographs. Try taking pictures of your yard from the same spots every year to document the growth of your plants.

Maintain Your Plan

Keep your new trees, shrubs and flowers adequately watered, and keep your planting areas weed-free by use of landscaping film and wood chips or shredded bark mulch. This avoids the use of herbicides for weed control. If problems develop with your plants, consult a local nursery, garden center or county extension agent.

And Finally...

Make sure to take the time to enjoy the wildlife that will eventually respond to your landscaping efforts.

Protecting Bird Habitat

Each year your state wildlife agency, private conservation groups, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, other federal agencies, and many private landowners and business leaders work together to conserve and manage millions of acres of habitat—swamps, forests, ponds and grasslands. These habitats provide nesting habitat for songbirds and shorebirds, ducks and geese, hawks and owls.

You can make a difference in helping protect habitats for migratory birds by joining a national, regional or local wildlife or habitat conservation organization. Also, each year thousands of individuals throughout the western hemisphere celebrate International Migratory Bird Day (IMBD) through bird festivals, walks and counts. Held annually on the second Saturday in May, IMBD is the hallmark event of Partners in Flight, an international coalition of federal, state, local government and non-government agencies and organizations, industry, the academic community, and private individuals. Partners in Flight's mission is to reverse the declines of some

migratory bird species and raise awareness of the important role that migratory birds play in our lives. Look for an IMBD event in your area. For more information about IMBD, Partners in Flight or migratory bird related issues, contact U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Division of Migratory Bird Management, 4401 North Fairfax Drive, Suite 634, Arlington, VA 22203 or visit <http://birds.fws.gov>.

Another way that you can help preserve a disappearing but valuable natural resource—wetlands—is by buying Federal Duck Stamps at your local post office. Money from sales of these stamps is used to protect wetlands. For more information, write U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Federal Duck Stamp Office, 1849 C Street, NW, Washington, DC 20240. <http://duckstamps.fws.gov>.

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