



Green Sense 08-18-2013

A Backyard for Birds

A couple of years ago, I installed a bird bath in my back yard. That has been a real attraction for not only birds, but other little wildlife, such as squirrels. During the hot summer it's particularly helpful to provide water for the birds. While this summer has had its share of rain, there have been a couple of hot spells where a variety of birds have visited the birdbaths that I keep watered from my rain barrel.

Just about any season is a good time to think about what can attract birds to your yard. Here are some tips from the National Wildlife Federation and others:

Water:

We've mentioned putting in a birdbath because water is so important. Wildlife need clean water sources for drinking and bathing. Besides the easily installed bird bath, water sources can be natural features such as ponds or puddling areas for butterflies, or you can install ponds or rain gardens.

Food:

Because everyone needs to eat! Planting native flowers, shrubs and trees is the easiest way to provide foliage, nectar, pollen, berries, seeds and nuts that many species of wildlife require to survive and thrive.

Native plants that are well adapted to survive in our geographic area have evolved to the climate, soils, rainfall and availability of pollinators and require less maintenance than imported plants. By adding more plants, shrubs and trees, you may also be reducing lawn areas, and helping the environment. Not having to mow and water a lawn is an added benefit.

Native plants are important for another reason. In addition to providing food and shelter, native plants are critical for birds because during the breeding season, many birds eat insects and feed insects to their offspring—often only particular kinds of insects that eat only particular native plants. In fact, chickadees and warblers rely on caterpillars for 90 percent of their diet during spring and summer.

In times when natural food sources are not as available, provide bird feeders, hummingbird feeders, squirrel feeders and butterfly feeders to add to the native food sources. Be sure to put bird feeders in locations that do not provide hiding places for cats and other predators. Place feeders ten to twelve feet from low shrubs or thickets. For bird species that will not eat from a feeder, your plantings of native plants will help, but be sure not to use pesticides in your yard or garden.

Some birds particularly benefit from sugar-water feeders. Many hummingbird and oriole species—missing from northern regions in winter—frequent sugar-water feeders during the warmer months.

Shelter:

Birds and other wildlife require places to hide in order to feel safe from people, predators and inclement weather. The trees and shrubs that provide food can also provide shelter; and native vegetation - shrubs, thickets and brush piles or even dead trees - can also provide cover for wildlife.

Wildlife likewise need a sheltered place to raise their offspring. Many trees and shrubs that form shelter also work as locations where wildlife can raise young, from wildflower meadows and bushes where many butterflies and moths lay their eggs, to old tree stumps with holes that can shelter a nest.

You can also install birdhouses or bat houses for roosting and raising young. Birds may also find other locations around your home where you least expect a nest, like a wreath left up too long over our garage door. Just wait them out until they have left the nest, then you can eventually remove the nest.

Wonders:

Attracting birds, and other wildlife, to your yard adds so many wonders you may miss otherwise. Hearing the various songbirds as you wake in the morning adds peace and harmony to the start of your day. You may develop an interest in identifying the birds in your yard, especially if you have children to share the experience. Watching birds and other wildlife going about their business with your children is an opportunity to nurture their compassion for the world in which we live.

A column by Reading Climate Committee members Michele Benson and Gina Snyder