

Backyards to the rescue

What you plant in your garden can play important part in saving threatened birds

As more and more of the natural environment is lost to agriculture, development, degradation and fragmentation, our backyards and other private lands are becoming increasingly important as a source of essential habitat for birds as well as other species of wildlife. Ensuring that birds, insects and other creatures have appropriate sources of food, nesting sites, clean water, and protective cover is key to their survival.



Drew Monkman
OUR CHANGING SEASONS

Simply relegating nature to parks and reserves won't cut it. There are too few of these areas, and they are often completely isolated from each other by a sea of development and agricultural land. Many of these reserves, especially in southern Ontario, have become "habitat islands" — natural areas surrounded by farms, roads, houses and industry, instead of water. To add insult to injury, many natural areas have been invaded with alien plants which provide far fewer benefits to wildlife.

Unless we design our green spaces to meet the needs of other species as well as ourselves, a large percentage of our native North American birds will eventually disappear and biodiversity will suffer greatly. Birds are literally starved out as development and modern farming practices destroy their food sources and homes. Our songbirds in particular live on insects, fruit, berries, and nectar — "green" food, almost all of which is provided by native trees, shrubs, flowers and vines.

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However, gardeners have the power to make an important contribution toward reversing this trend and helping to sustain biodiversity. Simply put, you can make a real difference to our bird life based on what you plant in your yard. We need to get into the habitat of seeing or yards as natural habitat — in other words, a sanctuary for wildlife as well as for ourselves and our family.

Our first objective should be to increase food, water, shelter and nesting opportunities for birds. At the same time, we should strive to decrease invasive plant sprawl, lawn size, and water and pesticide use. We need to begin looking at plants for their edible offerings to other species. Among the most important questions is whether they attract insects on which birds feed. When changing something in your yard, ask yourself, "Who or what will benefit from this change?" and "How will it affect species and the larger environment beyond my yard?"

Douglas Tallamy, a professor of entomology at the University of Delaware, explains the vital link between native plant species and native birds in his recent book, *Bringing Home Nature — How Native Plants Sustain Wildlife in Our Gardens*. Simply put, our native birds depend on native plants to survive. This is because birds require insect protein. Seeds and berries are not enough. Fully 96 per cent of landbirds feed their young insects. The key message of Tallamy's book is that native

insects cannot, or will not, eat non-native plants for food.

By planting primarily non-native trees, shrubs and herbaceous plants, we are shutting out the insects on which our native birds depend. Our yards have become sterile wastelands, at least from a native insect point of view.

To create a welcoming environment for insects, and therefore birds, we need to favour native plants. This doesn't mean eliminating your non-native exotics overnight, but it does mean gradually introducing a variety of native plants. In addition to insect food, native plants also provide seeds, fruit and nectar. Their growth habits present recognizable, safe nesting sites and cover that protect birds from predation as well as wind and rain. Their importance cannot be overstated.

When most suburbs are developed, the native vegetation is entirely

removed, only to be replaced with manicured lawns and a scattering of ornamental trees and shrubs from other parts of the world. We have decimated much of the native plant diversity that has always supported our favourite birds, insects and even mammals. In much of southern Ontario, 50 per cent or more of urban trees can be of a single type of tree. Species like the non-native Norway maple have now become a threat to our forests as they spread on their own into natural areas. Norway maples out-compete our native maples and shade and choke out the understory plants.

So, what do you plant? Not all natives are created equal. Ferns, for example, are of little interest to insects. Native oaks, willows and cherries, however, attract insects like a magnet. In fact, they host over 1,400 insect species among them. White oak is particularly

attractive to insects and, most importantly, to lepidopterans (moths and butterflies). Lepidopterans represent the largest group of all insect herbivores and are a very important component of the diet of most birds. A tree's ability to support lepidopterans is therefore a good measure of its usefulness as part of backyard habitat. In addition to the trees mentioned above, other excellent native species to plant include birch, poplar, crabapple, maples, elms, pines, hickory, hawthorn, alder, spruce, ash, basswood, walnut and beech.

In all seasons of the year, birds also need cover to protect themselves from weather extremes and from predators like cats. Evergreens such as cedars, junipers, firs, pines, and hemlock provide excellent cover from the elements year-round. They are especially effective when grouped in bunches. Thorned trees and shrubs, too, can turn a foliage hideaway into a real sanctuary, especially when feline predators are present. Be sure to place feeding stations close enough to vegetation so that birds can make a quick escape into cover should a predator come by.

You can also turn prunings into valuable shelter for birds. Use them to make



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Planting native trees will help attract migrating warblers to your yard, such as this male black-throated blue warbler (centre photo). Examples of native trees that are far more valuable to birds than non-native ones include (clockwise from top left) the hawthorn, choke cherry and round-leaved dogwood.



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a brush pile, three or four feet tall, tucked away in a corner of your yard. You can make the pile quite attractive by planting vines on it such as wild grape or Virginia creeper. Another idea is to put your discarded Christmas tree in the backyard for the winter. Scatter bird seed in and around the tree and soon ground feeders such as juncos and tree sparrows will be flocking to it.

From late winter through spring and early summer, birds also need a place to build a nest, lay eggs, and raise their young. Although exact nesting requirements vary from species to species, providing a variety of deciduous and coniferous trees and shrubs is the best approach. Nest boxes and platforms also make a wonderful addition to a yard. Some of the easier bird species to attract include house wrens, tree swallows, black-capped chickadees, red-breasted nuthatches, and American robins.

It is also important to provide birds with water for drinking and bathing. In fact, water will attract more species than those that visit bird feeders. Concrete bird baths are the simplest way to make water available to birds. Just make sure the sides incline gently to a depth of no more than two to three inches. The surface should be rough for better footing.

To attract an even greater variety of birds, however, you need to add some sound and motion to the water source. Nothing catches a passing songbird's attention like moving water. One way to do this is to let a garden hose drip into the bath. This can be particularly effective for attracting migrants, especially in late August through September. Devices called drippers are available commercially for the same purpose. In the longer term, you may wish to consider putting in a backyard pond. Ponds for birds should be shallow, with gently sloping shorelines.

A welcoming backyard habitat for birds and insects must also be pesticide free. Eliminating pesticides is arguably the most important thing you can do to make your yard and gardens bird-friendly. Also, a garden that approximates a wild, natural environment will usually catch the attention of birds far more quickly than one that is squeaky clean. This can be accomplished by leaving a "wild area" in the corner of your property to develop on its own with tall grasses, vines, dead leaves, and brambles. You might even want to leave some patches of bare earth or sand in a sheltered area. Birds will use these for taking dust baths.

Finally, you need to think about your lawn. To most birds, a large expanse of closely cropped grass represents danger from predators and has almost no habitat value. Design your yard so there are islands of food-producing plants and borders of plants around the edges. Don't keep your lawn cropped too closely and, of course, eliminate pesticide and herbicide use — even organic ones. In this way, you'll be safeguarding the worms and insects that feed the birds.

Next week, I'll look more closely at what species of trees, shrubs and flowers to plant.

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