



Backyard Bird Habitat

by Cecile Garrison, Master Gardener

Food, water, shelter, and a safe place to raise our family is all any of us really need! The same holds true for the birds and small animals that attempt to survive in increasingly difficult circumstances.

Even though we are technically in the country, subdivisions and ranchettes are closing in on wildlife habitats all around us. Possum, skunks, an occasional snake and hundreds of birds call our place home. Coyotes visit but they are usually just passing through. There are traces of gophers but five cats seem to keep them at bay. Three snakes have been sighted, captured and relocated to the other side of the plum orchards. Spiders, lizards and frogs are appreciated for their bad bug catching skills.

Birds and bats need insects as a source of protein and boy do we have a smorgasbord for them. I tolerate Black Widow and other spiders in the gardens because of their appetite for the bad bugs that eat our plants.

We cater to the birds! They eat, drink and seem to have fun just outside all our windows. While washing dishes I view dozens of wild canaries eating dried red salvia seeds and a hummingbird sipping nectar from tubular blossoms on the same plant. We purposefully let certain plants go to seed to provide food

Black birds, dove, blue jays and robins are common visitors along with many other species I have yet to identify. The Black Phoebe (*Sayornis nigricans*) follows us on our morning walk and while we work in the gardens. He is solitary except during mating season and even then, his mate shoos him away. It looks like the same Phoebe that comes every fall and stays through the winter. He finds shelter in the patio rafters and leaves his calling card in the gourd drying barn as well.

Italian cypress, Sequoia and a variety of fruit trees provide shelter and nesting spots for an increasing number of birds. We have added additional bushes, flowers, small trees and vines to attract and sustain wildlife. Various fountains and a large swimming pool are visited by a variety of birds for daily showers, baths and drinking.

When the hummingbirds show up in the spring and swarm around seven or eight sugar water feeders it's quite a show. They are attracted to our gardens by swaths of color from annuals and perennials and shelter in trees near the feeders.

You can create a habitat for birds even if you have a small yard in the city. Food, water, shelter and a place to raise their family-that's all they need. Hang one or two sugar water feeders (one part sugar to four parts water). Keep the solution fresh and you will attract hummingbirds. They will help control your insect population and provide entertainment, especially early morning and late afternoon. Provide shelter near the feeders or hang your feeders in the branches of a tree. If you plant colorful zinnias, cosmos and salvia in large groups you will catch their eye.



Purchase wild birdseed and place in feeders year round so a wide variety of birds know they have a consistent source of food and many species will make your home their own.

Add at least one water source such as a pond or fountain. The sound of moving water is a magnet for birds. A shallow dish with rocks will give butterflies a place to warm up. Avoid the indiscriminate use of insecticides and hope your neighbors do the same.

Enjoy the peace and tranquility bird watching adds to your life and help make theirs a little easier.

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