



Gardening for Birds with Native Plants

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We enjoy attracting birds to our landscapes as they bring many benefits. Bird watching is a fun and educational experience for all ages. Observing and identifying a new bird, watching their behavior, and listening to a lovely bird song allows us to connect with nature. In addition, birds are beneficial to our landscape. As predators of insect pests, they provide natural pest control for a variety of fruit and landscape trees and vegetable crops. Some birds serve as pollinators.

Over the last 50 years, songbirds have been in decline due to multiple complex environmental factors such as habitat loss from urban sprawl, pesticide use and decreasing insect numbers, climate change, cats, and glass windows.

To attract birds to your yard, consider their basic needs: food, shelter, water.

Food

Native trees, shrubs and flowers will attract local birds and strengthen the ecosystem. Birds feed on the berries, seeds and nuts that native plants produce and on the insects the plants attract. Native plants attract native insects that are vital to the food chain.

Plant a variety of native trees and plants that produce berries, nuts and seeds at different times of the year. Diverse plants are needed as birds shift their eating patterns depending on their needs. For example, some may favor berries until reproduction, then switch to insects when caring for their young. The berries and insects will likely be acquired from different plants. Minimize pesticides to ensure a safe food source.

Nuts: Oaks and walnut trees provide nuts birds can store.

Seeds: Seed producing plants include buckwheat, yarrow, Salvia, coyote bush, willow, Ceanothus, native sunflower (*Encelia californica*), California aster (*Corethrogyne filaginifolia*) and deer grass (*Muhlenbergia rigens*). Do not prune dead or dying flowers of these plants as they will produce abundant seeds for the birds.

Berries: Plants with berries include manzanita, toyon (winter berries), Prunus (holly leaf cherry), coffeeberry, ribes (currants autumn), snowberry, fuchsia (flowering gooseberry). Elderberry (*Sambucus Mexicana* autumn) is one of the most important food sources for California birds.

Insects: Native plants and native insects have co-evolved. Native plants attract 3-4x more insects than non-native plants. 96% of land birds feed insects to chicks. Native trees and plants host many caterpillar species which are an important source of protein for birds especially during breeding season. Oak trees are especially attractive to caterpillars.

Some birds scratch at the ground searching for insects and insect pupae. Spring leaf litter is home to insects so delay leaf clean up until summer.

Shelter

Habitat: provide protection from predators and nesting sites.

Create layers: provide both living and non-living plant material

Trees and shrubs: provide trees for roosting and shrubs for nesting and protection from predators. Consider a roosting pole for raptors if space allows.

Nesting material: Baccharis (coyote bush) is specifically helpful as it provides fluff for nesting material. Plants producing small twigs are also useful.

Brush piles: provide protection from predators and serve as nesting sites for some birds. Dead trees offer roosting and cavity nesting.

Water

While many birds obtain water from their food, you can attract more birds by providing a year-round water source for drinking and bathing. Place in shade near but not under trees and shrubs. The ideal bath slopes from one inch to 3 inches. Include rocks or sticks within the dish birds can land on and assess depth of water. Water sources can be a fountain, bird bath, or a hollowed stone. Running or moving water attracts birds and discourages mosquitos. Change water every 1-2 days if not in a recirculating system.

References

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