

Gardening: It's for the Birds!

Resource: Gardening Bird-by-Bird, Cornell University

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We are lucky to live near the Mississippi River, one of the nation's great bird migration corridors. We also have many wooded areas, large parks, and natural areas which provide plenty of great spaces for birds. If you want to attract these birds to your yard there are a few things you can do to improve your chances of seeing these great and beautiful little creatures.

You need to provide four basic things to create a welcoming environment for birds: cover, water, nesting areas, and of course their favorite foods.

Water

All birds need water to drink. Birds also use water for bathing. Bird baths and ponds provide excellent water sources. Keep the water clean and drain and refill bird baths regularly.

Cover

Birds need to feel safe. The nearby cover of trees and shrubs lets them stay closer to your feeders and come more often. Placing this cover around the edges of your yard and near feeders gives birds the perfect spot to fly to safety. Create paths of plants, trees, and shrubs for birds to feel safe as they travel across your yard too.

Be sure to include grasses and flowers as well as evergreens which are great for season long cover and protection from the elements. Different types of birds like different levels to hang out in so provide a variety of heights of trees and shrubs to attract the most types of birds.

Nesting

Natural areas in trees and shrubs as well as bird houses provide the perfect, safe nesting spots.

Favorite Foods

This section is divided up into four groups of birds based on their preferred food source. Providing one or more of the food sources in each group will attract many birds to your yard. Specific trees, shrubs, annuals and perennials are listed at the end of this handout.

- **Insect feeders**

All birds eat insects which are their #1 choice of food. Woodpeckers, flycatchers, swallows, nuthatches, wrens, waxwings, and tanagers all eat insects. These birds eat bugs off of plants, trees, and mulch around plants and shrubs too. If you plant things to attract insects that birds like, the birds will come. This includes the gardens you plant to attract butterflies which maybe inadvertently create a bird garden too! Caterpillar plants like dill, parsley, and fennel provide food for birds and bluebirds like the white cabbage butterflies and beetle larvae too.

- **Seed & nut feeders**

There are over 200 species of birds that rely on seeds which pack lots of nutrients just as seeds and nuts do for people. Doves, chickadees, nuthatches, orioles, finches, and juncos are just some of the common seed feeders while blue jays, woodpeckers, and nuthatches are big nut feeders.

Sunflower and millet mixes are popular and well liked by backyard birds. Avoid mixes with lots of cracked corn, oats, wheat which are often uneaten and can be seen tossed to the side by birds.

Tree seeds like ash, maple, pines are good for birds too. In the fall, delay cutting back these seed plants and let the birds enjoy the seeds into winter.

- **Fruit & berry feeders**

Thrushes, waxwings, and tanagers are some of the fruit/berry feeders. There are many types of trees and shrubs that can provide food sources for these birds. Some include trees such as mulberry and cherry and fruit producing shrubs and plants like blueberries, elderberries, and strawberries. Flowering dogwood and crabapples with fruit that persists into winter provide nesting locations and late season fruit.

- **Nectar feeders**

This type includes hummingbirds and orioles. There are a variety of nectar feeders and plants for hummingbirds and nectar, jelly and orange feeders for orioles. Attract these birds at feeders in spring when there are few nectar plants available. See our fact sheet **Gardening for Hummingbirds** for more information about what plants attract these birds.

Shrubs for birds

Serviceberry
Pagoda dogwood
Red twig dogwood
Arrowwood viburnum
Nanking cherry
Cotoneaster
Hazelnut

Trees for birds

Crab apple
Hackberry
Oak trees
Hawthorne
American Cranberry viburnum
Mulberry
Sumac
Barberry
Red cedar
Roses

Annuals (grown as a seed source)

Amaranthus
Bachelor's Buttons
Poppies
Sunflowers
Cosmos
Zinnias

Perennials (grown as source of seeds or nectar, habitat, and cover)

Aster (*Aster species* and cultivars)

Bee balm (*Monarda species* and cultivars)

Black-eyed susan (*Rudbeckia species*)

Cardinal flower (*Lobelia cardinalis*)

Columbine (*Aquilegia species* and cultivars)

Compass plant (*Silphium integrifolium*)

Coreopsis (*Coreopsis species* and cultivars)

Delphinium (*Delphinium species* and cultivars)

False sunflower (*Heliopsis helianthoides*)

Globe thistle (*Echinops exaltatus*)

Goldenrod (*Soilidago species* and cultivars)

Joe-pye weed (*Eupatorium*)

Maiden grass (*Miscanthus species* and cultivars)

Moss pink (*Phlox subulata*)

Penstemon (*Penstemon spp.*)

Prickly pear cactus (*Opuntia compressa*)

Purple coneflower (*Echinacea species* and cultivars)

Sunflower (*Helianthus species* and cultivars)

Yarrow (*Achellea species* and cultivars)