

Gardening for Wildlife

The Los Gatos Birdwatcher is here to help...

Habitat is key to attracting the widest variety of birds to your backyard. Birds have four basic needs: food, water, shelter, habitat. You can offer food for seed eaters by presenting quality seed in a variety of specialty feeders, but not all birds eat seed. You can take care of more species of birds with a birdbath or water feature, but they need shelter to preen safely. You can provide shelter for cavity nesters by putting up a variety of houses with different hole diameters. However, many birds don't use cavities. If you also plant trees, shrubs and flowers that are attractive to a variety of birds, you will see much more activity in your yard.



trees of your neighbor's, you can develop a larger connecting habitat for the birds.

Cover is very important for several reasons. First and foremost it provides protection from predators (raptors, cats, and humans.) Cover also provides shelter from inclement

weather and places for some birds to build nests without being seen. Cover can take the form of trees, shrubs, dense tall grasses, vines, rock piles, and brush piles. If you have many deciduous trees, consider adding some evergreen plants for cover during the winter.

In new development, with little vegetation, consider creating "instant cover" by using your discarded Christmas tree to create a brush pile. Potted plants or container gardens with annuals and perennials for hummingbirds is quick and easy. Plant a line of sunflowers along the fence and watch the show as goldfinch strip the leaves while waiting for the flowers to turn to seed.



Plantings are not only important for cover but also provide habitat for other bird behavior. By having both large trees for canopy and a leafy subcanopy allows some birds to sing and feed in one, nest in the other. A variety of plantings will also allow for display areas and singing posts. Consider planting vegetation that flowers and produces fruit in succession through the seasons (i.e. high fat fruit ripens in the fall just in time for the migratory birds). Leaf litter is important for scratchers like towhees and California thrasher.

Bringing birds to your yard is beneficial for several other reasons. They bring lots of enjoyment with them as well as performing insect control and plant pollination duties. By reducing or eliminating the use of pesticides, you can foster a healthy environment enjoyed by the birds, your children and pets.

Plant Possibilities

The list below is by no means inclusive. There are many more native and non-native species that work well for birds, butterflies and other wildlife.

- Native Oaks (jays, woodpeckers, chickadees, titmouse, hummingbirds)
- Madrone (band-tailed pigeons, cedar waxwings, pine siskins)
- Manzanita (hummingbirds, butterflies)
- Toyon (flicker, robin, mockingbird, cedar waxwing, deer)
- Ceanothus (towhee, white crowned sparrow, western bluebird)
- Elderberry (towhee, cedar waxwings, robin, western bluebird)
- Willow (hummingbirds, butterflies)

Why Gardening for Birds is Important

Increased development in our area has led to habitat reduction and fragmentation of habitat. Researchers have noticed a significant decline in numbers of migratory songbirds. The loss of habitat in breeding grounds, wintering areas and along migratory routes is devastating both migrant and resident songbirds. Since there are fewer large undisturbed forest tracts, smaller wood lots in individual yards become increasingly important to songbirds. Many areas have also been planted with exotic (non-native) plants which are not always adopted by birds. Native planting can reduce water usage, reduce maintenance, and reduce the need for chemical fertilizers. By planning your habitat to include the

Hummingbird and Butterfly Favorites

- Lantana
- Sages
- California Fuchsia
- Penstemon
- Sticky Monkey Flower
- Western Columbine (*Aquilegia formosa*)
- Hound's Tongue (*Cynoglossum grande*)
- Red Larkspur (*Delphinium cardinale*)
- Island Bush Snapdragon (*Galvezia speciosa*)
- Bladder Pod (*Isomeris arborea*)
- Twinberry (*Native honeysuckle*)
- Wild Gooseberry (*Ribes speciosum*)
- Woolly blue curls (*Trichostemma lanatum*)
- Quail Bush (*Atriplex lentiformis*)

Plants to Avoid

According to the “Don’t plant a pest!” brochure published by the California Invasive Plant Council (Cal-IPC), “over half of the plants currently damaging California’s wildlands were originally introduced for landscaping purposes. Garden escapes like pampas grass and Scotch broom may have desirable characteristics in a garden setting, but outside the garden these plants displace native species and alter natural processes.”

“Some of these plants show weedy tendencies in the garden as well. For example, English ivy can take over a yard and damage buildings and fences. Likewise, when birds drop seeds near a stream, English ivy can take over native vegetation and degrade wildlife habitat.”

“Invasive plants are by nature a regional problem. A plant that jumps out of the garden in one climate and habitat type may behave perfectly in another.”

The brochure lists twelve local problem plants, the reasons they are problems, alternative suggestions, and what kind of growing conditions are required. For example: Don’t plant: periwinkle (*Vinca major*) This aggressive grower has trailing stems that root wherever they touch the soil. This ability to resprout from stem fragments enables periwinkle to spread rapidly in shady creeks and drainages, smothering the native plant community. Instead try; pachysandra (*Pachysandra terminalis*), Serbian bellflower (*Campanula poscharskyana*), ivory star jasmine (*Trachelospermum asiaticum*), wild ginger (*Asarum caudatum*), or bear’s foot hellebore (*Helleborus foetidus*).

For a complete listing of the twelve problem plants and their alternatives, ask us for a copy of “Don’t Plant a Pest!” or visit Cal-IPC’s website at www.cal-ipc.org or call them at 510/843-3902.

Publications

The Habitat Garden Book
(Wildlife Landscaping for the San Francisco Bay Region)
by Nancy Bauer

Designing California Native Gardens,
by Keator, Middlebrook

Native Plants for the Garden,
by Bornstein, Fross, O’Brien

Welcoming Wildlife to the Garden,
by Johnson, McDiarmid, Turner

The Landscaping Ideas of Jays,
by Lowry

Sources

California Native Plant Society
CNPS has lots of information, plant lists and activities including an annual sale. (www.cnps-scv.org)

California Native Garden Foundation
(www.cngf.org): Connected to **Middlebrook Gardens**, 76 Race St., San Jose 408/292-9993. Middlebrook Gardens has demonstration areas and native plants from specific ecosystems for sale. (www.middlebrook-gardens.com)

Native Revival Nursery
Great selection and helpful staff (www.nativerivival.com) 831/684-1811 (Aptos)

Yerba Buena Nursery
Extensive demonstration garden showcasing much of what is for sale. (www.yerbabuenanursery.com) 650/851-1668 (Woodside)

Annie’s Annuals
Located in Richmond, but a full catalog is available. They also sell 4” pots to many nurseries. (www.anniesannuals.com) 510/215-1671

Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society
Certifies backyards with their Bird Sanctuary Program (www.scvas.org) 408/252-3740.

Master Gardeners
Lots of classes and information (www.mastergardeners.org)

