

# How do I Attract Birds to My Backyard?

You can attract birds to your backyard by providing the essentials. If you set up an optimal wildlife habitat in your backyard, you may find that you'll not only have common eastern birds nesting, but you'll also have rare migrants stopping by on their way up north in the spring or on their way down south in the fall.

## Food

The best way to make a bird's favorite food available is to think from the ground up. In the spring and summer months, most birds eat insects. If you want to attract birds, bugs like caterpillars, beetles, and grasshoppers must be allowed to thrive. To keep these insects around, it is important to supply the insects with the plants they need. The wildlife in your backyard is specifically adapted to this environment and thus has very particular tastes. This is why providing native plant species is so important.



Plants and animals that are native to this area have spent millions of years interacting with each other in very specific ways. Animals prefer to use the native plants with which they have adapted. Think of the example of the monarch butterfly. Monarchs lay their eggs on milkweed. When the eggs hatch into larvae (caterpillars), they feed solely on milkweed as they grow. Similar examples of specific interactions between animals and plants exist with birds. For instance, the American goldfinch does not start breeding until the thistle is in bloom. The reason why is not clearly understood, but it is known that thistle plays an important role in both nest construction and the diet of goldfinch chicks.

Feeders are, of course, a great way to attract birds to your yard. They should have short perches and no basin at the bottom. This will keep large flocks of pigeons, starlings, grackles and crows away from your feeder. Tube feeders are best for this reason. Squirrels can be kept off of feeders using a baffle (disc that prevent squirrels from running up a feeder pole). Baffles are also useful for hanging feeders when placed above the feeder. Baffles should be at least 18 inches in diameter. You can make your own baffle from an old record, bowl or soda bottle.

## Shelter and places to raise young

When a bird decides on a place to nest, the key factors they look for are density and cover. What some people see as plant "clutter" in their backyard looks like supreme nesting habitat to birds and other wildlife. In order to attract nesting birds to your backyard, vegetation that is dense enough to provide protection from the elements and from predators must be provided. A dense area with short, medium and tall vegetation that is structured in stacked layers (called vertical canopy structure), allows birds that forage in shrubs, like cardinals, and birds that forage in treetops, like chickadees, to exist in the same horizontal space. Adding nest boxes to your back yard is a great way to enhance your experience with backyard birds by providing nesting habitat for cavity nesting birds such as the Carolina chickadee, Tufted titmouse, and House Wren. For great tips on how to build, or purchase the ideal nest box, check out <http://www.birds.cornell.edu/nestinginfo/>, or as your Neighborhood Nestwatch field technician for a paper copy.



## The basics — Habitat checklist

**A list of suggestions for constructing an optimum wildlife habitat in your backyard- includes only native plants that are indigenous to the greater Washington, DC area.**

- \_\_\_\_\_ **Conifers (cone bearing trees):** Important trees for nesting and insect foraging. Provide important winter shelter. Examples: pines, junipers and cedars.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Thick shrubs, vines and ground cover:** Excellent nesting habitat (especially for catbirds and cardinals), good for shelter and insect foraging.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Nut and acorn trees:** Very important source of nuts, nesting habitat and insects, good source of food in fall and winter, examples: oaks, hickories, and walnuts.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Dead tree snags:** Nesting habitat for a variety of wildlife species, including woodpeckers, flying squirrels, chickadees, bluebirds and house wrens.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Bird feeders:** Attract seedeaters like chickadees, finches, cardinals, grosbeaks, sparrows, blackbirds, jays, titmice and doves. Best choice: sunflower seeds (highest fat and preferred by most birds).
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Nest boxes:** Attract house wrens, Carolina chickadees, white-breasted nuthatches, eastern bluebirds and tufted titmice. Provides shelter and protection from predators.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Native grasses and legumes (un-mowed):** Attract grasshoppers and crickets (eaten by many birds), provides cover for ground nesting birds (especially song sparrows), provides seeds.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Piles of brush, sticks or yard refuse:** nesting habitat, source of nesting material (especially for Carolina wrens), shelter and source of insects.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Nectar-producing plants:** attract hummingbirds, orioles and insects eaten by birds, best examples: Eastern Columbine, White Turtlehead, Jewelweed, Cardinal Flower, Bee Balm, Evening Primrose, Sundrops, Beardtongue, Tulip Poplar and Trumpet Honeysuckle.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Low growing plants:** Attract caterpillars and other insects that birds eat. Also attracts butterflies, best examples: milkweed, purple coneflower and goldenrod.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Summer-fruiting plants:** Eaten by numerous birds, important staple during the breeding season. Examples: black cherry, serviceberry, blackberry, blueberry, and elderberry.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Fall-fruiting plants:** Important for migratory birds, allows them to store energy for migration, may attract rare migrants to your yard in early fall, examples: flowering dogwood, hackberry, pokeweed, and red chokeberry.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Winter-fruiting plants:** Sustain year-round residents like cardinals, examples: American holly, eastern red cedar, bayberry, and sumac.
- \_\_\_\_\_ **Water:** Providing water for drinking and bathing will attract both migratory and residential birds to your yard. Provide a shallow dish of water lined with stones in early spring (March-April) to bring in migrants that are passing through.