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70 Cottonwood Street, Woodland, CA 95695 Tel. (530) 666-8143 Fax (530) 666-8736

BACKYARD HABITATS: ATTRACTING BIRDS

By Carol Atkins and Ernest Pimentel

Per-chick-a-ree, Per-chick-a-ree, and cheer-o-lee, cheer-o-lee. The sound of birds in the backyard. Birds serenade people all across North America, especially in areas where gardeners have grown plants to attract them. These people not only enjoy the pleasant song of the birds, but are also entertained for hours by the birds' various activities – fluffing feathers against the cold, snatching up insects, splashing in a birdbath, soaring high in the sky, sweeping courtship displays, and protecting territory. The bird families most likely to appear in the backyards in Yolo County include finches, sparrows, jays, warblers, robins, hawks, crows, and magpies. What attracts birds to one's yard? The following provides some general information on the basic needs of birds that can be met with a minimum of effort and cost.



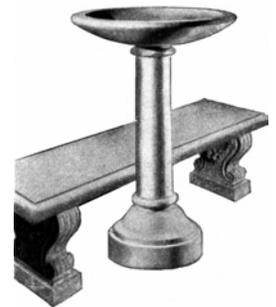
FOOD. Providing a broad selection of food allows the birds to not only satisfy their palate, but also encourages different species to visit your backyard. Some food can come directly from plants in the yard, such as cherries, blackberries, raspberries, hollyberries, and grass seeds. Other food, such as mixed birdseed, cracked corn, and sunflower seeds, can be provided in bird feeders. Insects, earthworms, caterpillars, flies, aphids, and mites are another food source, and provide an important source of protein during breeding season.



Birds have the greatest need for supplemental feeding during the winter, but if you don't plan on feeding the birds all winter long, begin cutting back on seed gradually. This will make the birds less dependent on your feeding station, and encourage them to seek another source of food before they are entirely cut off.

Bird feeders should be sheltered from prevailing winds and weather, but near enough to cover so that the birds can escape predators. The feeders should also be positioned where they won't lure birds to fly into windows.

WATER. The need for water is often overlooked. Next to food, a reliable, safe, shallow supply of clean water is important to attract birds. Most birds will drink the water, but others may want to splash around and bathe in it. Some may want to dunk their food in it. The trick to attracting the birds is to provide a gradual transition from very shallow to deeper water (no greater than three inches). The bottom of the bath should be slightly rough-textured to allow the bird to maintain a foothold. A bird will not plunge into water of unknown depth, so while a steep-sided birdbath may entice the birds to drink, they will not bathe in it. Several resources recognize the sound of running water as a powerful lure to water. A birdbath is best located in a sheltered area out of direct sunlight. Birdbaths should be refilled frequently and cleaned regularly. Water is especially important during the summer months.



SHELTER. Plants provide birds with cover from predators and shelter from the elements. Dense, broad-leaved evergreen trees, shrubs, and vines provide shelter from the wind and the rain. They also provide plant materials for nest building. Birdhouses can also be hand built or purchased, which comes in handy where gardens aren't mature enough to provide desirable nesting sites. Not all birds use birdhouses. For example, nesting shelves are popular with robins.



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PLANTS. Trees, shrubs, vines, flowers, grasses, and weeds can all contribute to a bird-attracting landscape. The seeds from flowers, grasses, and weeds are eagerly eaten, as are any insects that may be harbored by these plants. Trees and shrubs provide canopy and places for nesting, shelter from the elements, and an escape from predators. Some also provide food (e.g., cherry trees and berry vines). Birds in the wild are accustomed to a diverse mingling of plants that are not neatly manicured; however, you may want to bring some order to the plants in your yard by doing a minimum of pruning. This brings up a very important aspect of birdscaping: as you set about designing, preparing, and planting your birdscape, you will need to determine how much yard neglect you can tolerate, for this is what habitat birds are used to in the wild. Keep in mind that the plants used to attract birds can be equally as pleasing to the home gardener. For example, a garden landscaped with large trees giving way to shorter trees, which then transition to shrubs and grasses, best mimics nature and attracts a diverse group of birds. In urban areas, these features do not need to be all in one yard, but can be borrowed from adjacent properties. If your yard allows, you may want to let the grasses, weeds, and flowers grow wild. Native plants are likely to appeal to the local birds species, and fit the general natural ecology of your area.

RESOURCES

An Illustrated Guide to Attracting Birds. 1995. Sunset Publishing Cooperation. Menlo Park, CA.
Attracting Backyard Wildlife. 1989. Bill Merilees. Voyageur Press. Stillwater, MN.

*Abridged and Adapted by S.L. Green
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