

BEYOND THE BIRD FEEDER:

Creating a Bird-Friendly Yard with Native Wisconsin Plants



Jack Bartholmai

By **MARIETTE NOWAK** for the *Wisconsin Society for Ornithology, Inc.*

Over millions of years, birds and plants have developed mutually beneficial relationships. Birds help pollinate plants, disperse their seeds, and eat the insects that can ravage them. To entice the help of birds, plants have evolved colorful, nectar-

filled flowers and luscious, nutrient-packed fruits and seeds. In addition, the limbs and leaves of many plants offer nesting sites and cover for a wide variety of bird species.

Birds & Plants — *an ancient and enduring collaboration*



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Reasons to Landscape for Birds

“Small ‘islands’ of habitat can provide food resources to birds, particularly during migration.”

-Victoria Piaskowski, retired international coordinator, Birds Without Borders — *Aves Sin Fronteras*® project, Foundation for Wildlife Conservation, Inc., and Zoological Society of Milwaukee.

- Habitat loss is the single most important cause of the decline of species. Your yard, whatever its size, can offer habitat for birds.
- Many birds seldom or never use feeders, preferring natural foods.
- Feeder birds get only a relatively small portion of their nutrition from feeder food, especially during the critical nesting period.
- Native landscapes help sustain many other attractive species, including butterflies, moths, beetles, and the plants themselves.

Choose Native Plant Species

“Native plants, which have co-evolved with native wild birds, are more likely to provide a mix of foods — just the right size, and with just the right kind



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of nutrition — and just when the birds need them.”

- Stephen Kress, National Audubon Society.

Researchers have found that native plants are better for native birds and for the insects they need for survival. Some important findings include the following:

- More bird species and greater numbers of birds occur in areas with native vegetation than in areas with exotic, or non-native, vegetation.
- Birds nesting in weedy shrubs like buckthorn and honeysuckle are more likely to fall victim to predators such as cats and raccoons than are birds nesting in native forests. This is due to lower branches, lack of thorns, and other characteristics of the non-native shrubs.

- Cedar Waxwings that eat the berries of one species of non-native honeysuckle develop orange, rather than yellow, tail bands. This color change could be harmful to the birds, since they use color in mate selection and territorial disputes.
- Most insects, so important for bird nutrition, prefer native host plants and, in fact, often lack the enzymes needed to digest non-native plants. Caterpillars are the preferred protein food for nestlings.
- Native wildflowers often offer significantly more nectar for hummingbirds than do cultivated flowers.
- Many varieties of native species, which provide food for birds throughout the year, are being replaced by a very limited number of invasive non-native species. These invasives offer food of reduced variety, quality, and seasonal availability.

Native Plants Defined

Native plants are ones that existed in an area prior to European settlement. These plants are well adapted to climate, precipitation, soils, insects, and other local conditions and are consequently easier to grow than non-natives. A list of the best Wisconsin native plants for attracting birds starts on page 7. For further information on the plants native to your area, check with your local nature centers, colleges, universities, the Wisconsin State Herbarium (www.botany.wisc.edu/wisflora/), Wild Ones: Native Plants, Natural Landscapes (www.wildones.org), and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources (dnr.wi.gov).



David Nowak

Where to Get Native Plants

Native plants and source lists for native plants are often available at local nature centers and native plant nurseries. The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, Bureau of Endangered Resources, provides an online list of Native Plant Nurseries: <http://dnr.wi.gov/files/pdf/pubs/er/er0698.pdf>.

Plants should be purchased from reputable suppliers, not dug from the wild. It is, in fact, illegal to remove plants from public lands. In the case of private lands, be sure to get the landowner's permission.

For “Guidelines on the Selection of Native Plants,” see the Wild Ones Natural Landscapers website (www.wildones.org).

Getting Started

- **Take an inventory.**
- **For full yard restorations,** you may want to let neighbors know what you are doing and check with officials regarding local regulations.
- **Have your soil tested,** a service offered through your county University of Wisconsin– Extension Office (usually listed under county offices in your phone book).

Planning Your Yard

- Keep the native plants in your yard; remove the invasive exotics.
- Mimic the multiple layers of growth found in many natural settings: trees, shrubs, vines, and herbaceous plants.
- Select plants that will provide berries, seeds, nuts, and insects for birds.
- Provide evergreens for winter shelter.
- Keep dead trees, standing or fallen, to provide insect food, cavities, and perching sites for birds. The branches of dead trees can be removed if they are dangerous.
- Create a brush pile to provide shelter.
- Leave at least some leaf litter for ground-feeding birds, who will scrape through the litter for insects.
- Stop using herbicides and pesticides, which can be ingested by birds as they feed on insects and plants. Also, don't use rodenticides, which harm or kill birds of prey when they feed

on animals that have ingested the poison.

- Limit or eliminate your lawn for less mowing, fertilizing, watering, and pollution, and to make more room for natives.

Additional Possibilities

“Some habitats are of particular interest to backyard birdwatchers because small examples can be replicated in backyards, including freshwater marshes, ponds, brooks, wooded swamps, bogs, woodlots, pine barrens, streamside forests, thickets, prairies, deserts, and alpine meadows.”

- Donald S. Heintzelman, *The Complete Backyard Birdwatcher's Home Companion.*

- Restore or recreate the habitat(s) once native to your area — woodland, wetland, prairie, or savannah — which will attract birds native to those habitats.
- Create habitats for particular



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birds: a hummingbird garden, a migratory bird stopover, a bluebird haven, a woodland bird retreat, a finch garden (prairie), a winter bird area, or a wetland bird habitat.

Regardless of the size of your yard, you can help reverse the loss of bird habitat. By planting the native plants upon which our birds depend, you'll be rewarded with a bounty of birds and natural beauty just beyond your doorstep.

Protect Your Birds

Keep your pet cats indoors and urge your neighbors to do the same. Cats kill millions of birds in Wisconsin each year and it has been documented that bells and declawing are mostly ineffective in preventing this predation. For more information see American Bird Conservancy's "Cats Indoors!" brochure (<http://www.abcbirds.org/abcprograms/policy/cats/index.htm>).