

# Birdscaping in the Midwest

By Mariette Nowak

*“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 by planting native plants offering food, shelter and nesting sites for birds. Native landscapes also help sustain many other species, including butterflies, moths, and bees.

Be sure to choose *native* plant species.

Researchers have documented the fact that native plants are better for native birds because they usually provide more nectar and nourishing fruit and seeds. In addition, native plants host more insects that birds depend on, especially for their nestlings. As Steve Kress, an ornithologist with National Audubon Society, has said, “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 of nutrition – and just when the birds need them.”

Avoid cultivars of native plants, which are not considered native because of the many changes that result from their development. Cultivars have a descriptive name in quotes added to their names, such as ‘Gro-Lo’ Fragrant Sumac. ‘Gro-Lo’ Fragrant Sumac is shorter than the native Fragrant Sumac and, unfortunately, rarely develops berries for birds, as does the true native species.

Different habitat gardens will attract different species of birds. You may want to create several different bird habitat gardens on your property. A prairie patch in a sunny area, a little woodland in a shady area, or a shrubby hideaway on the edge of your yard will attract and support a variety of birds.

## ***Hummingbird Garden***

Regardless of the size of your yard, you have an excellent chance of attracting Ruby-throated Hummingbirds, the only hummingbird species common the Midwest. Larger yards may attract hummers for the season, while smaller yards are sure to entice them for a visit during migration. The native habitat of hummers is woodland edge or openings within woodlands, offering both sunny areas and shade - a habitat that is easily created on most properties.

Try to provide a varied and continuous rainbow of nectar- rich blossoms from spring to fall. Large, vibrant splashes of color are most attractive to these winged gems. While red is the hummingbirds’ favorite color, they feed on flowers of every hue - yellow, white, blue and purple. Some of the Ruby-throats’ favorite flowers are the Cardinal Flower, Wild Columbine, Jewelweed, Woodland Phlox and Blazing Star.

### ***Prairie Bird Garden***

Prairie gardening has become so popular and well accepted that landscape designers have labeled it “the new American garden style.” Many bird species are attracted to prairies, whether large and small - including America Goldfinches, Baltimore Orioles, Mourning Doves, Tree Swallows, Chipping Sparrows and Song Sparrows.

Prairies consist primarily of grasses and wildflowers in sunny open sites. A lawn in an un-shaded area of a typical yard could be easily replaced with prairie. Generally, a short grass prairie with plants of short height is a good choice around homes and buildings. However, tall grass prairie is native to much of the Midwest and many beautiful tall grass prairie plantings have been created in both front and back yards. Select a variety plants from different families to provide nourishment for the birds throughout the year. Some prairie garden favorites are Little Bluestem Grass, Illinois or Climbing Prairie Rose, Showy Goldenrod, New England Aster, Yellow Coneflowers and Prairie Sunflower. Avoid “Meadow in a Can” commercial mixes, which usually include short-lived plants, including some that are not native to your region and may even be invasive.

### **The Bluebird Savanna Garden**

Savannas are basically scattered trees with a ground layer of wildflowers and grasses. This description is not too different than that of the average yard, with its expanse of lawn along with a few trees and shrubs. If you replace your lawn with the native species of wildflowers and grasses, your yard will resemble a savanna. Wild Lupine, Spiderwort, Oxeye Sunflower, New England Aster and Showy Goldenrod are excellent wildflowers that grow in the light shade of savannas. Bur oaks are the original savanna trees in our area and, if possible, add a bur oak or other oak species, all of which are invaluable trees for birds. Eastern bluebirds, as well as Northern Flickers, Red-headed Woodpeckers and many other birds thrive in savanna habitats.

### **Woodland Bird Garden**

Birds, particularly the beautiful wood warblers, seek out oak/hickory forests during spring migration because they harbor many small caterpillars and other insects essential for fueling their travels. And in fall, these trees offer nuts, attracting Blue Jays, Red-head Woodpeckers, Red-bellied Woodpeckers, Eastern Towhees and Brown Thrashers and others. Oaks, in particular, host over 500 species of insects, a prime food for most nestling birds, as well as for migrants.

The shadier north side of your house is best for a woodland garden, although the east side, which receives less intense morning light, also works well. Many gardeners build their woodland around existing trees, but you can also start from scratch. Often it's best to plant fast-growing aspen, birch or cherry along with your other slower-growing species, such as oaks and hickories, to provide early shade for them. Add some native shrubs below the trees, as well as ground-layer plants. Solomon Seal, Wild Geranium, Zigzag Goldenrod, Wild Strawberry, Woodland Sunflower and a variety of native violets are easy, no-fail herbaceous plants that provide nourishment for birds and thrive in many types of woodland.

### **Wetland Bird Garden**

Wetlands, large or small, can attract a diversity of birds. A rain garden is basically a small-scale wetland, designed to capture storm water runoff from roofs, roads and

lawns. These gardens don't breed mosquitos because they are designed to hold water temporarily, just a few hours after storms. Large- scale retention ponds and rural wetlands are essentially large rain gardens and may hold water for longer periods. There are many native wetland plants that are both beautiful and bird friendly. Some favorites are Cardinal Flower, Blazing Stars, Turk's Cap Lilies, Iris, and New England Aster. Watch for finches, sparrows, cardinals, grosbeaks, and yellowthroats, among the many birds that will find sustenance rain gardens.

### **Migratory Bird Garden**

Since birds can spend as much as half the year in migration, places for them to stop to rest and feed during their journeys are critical. Studies have found that even small islands of habitat in urban and agricultural landscapes can help these tired, famished migrants.

Researchers have found that birds seem to time their spring migration to coincide with the emergence of leaf-eating caterpillars on trees and shrubs. Oaks host the most insects and were preferred by many birds. In fall, many birds feed on fruiting shrubs as they journey south and dogwood berries, which are very high in fat, are especially favored. Many migrating sparrows and finches feed on the seeds of wildflowers and native grasses, as well as some seed-producing trees and shrubs. A few top choices are Silphiums, such as Compass Plant and Cup Plant, Sunflowers, and native grasses like Little and Big Bluestem.

### **Shrubland Bird Garden**

A shrubby border or larger shrubby expanse will offer excellent habitat for some of our favorite birds, including catbirds, towhees, thrashers buntings and cardinals. Dogwoods and viburnums are among the top choices among native Midwestern shrubs and include a variety of species from which you can choose those that suits your soil and situation. Most shrubs grow best in sunny locations and generally need plenty of light to flower and fruit.

### **Winter Bird Garden**

Winter is a favorite time for putting up bird feeders and is an ideal time to provide birds with extra nourishment since natural foods are scarce in the coldest season of the year. But most bird species don't come to feeders. And the birds that do so, get a small fraction of their food from them - only 21% for Black-capped Chickadees, according to a Wisconsin study. You can attract a greater variety of winter birds to your yard by providing habitat that offers their natural foods and adequate cover to shelter them from bitter cold and snowstorms.

Cover is one of the most important requirements for a winter garden and can be provided by native evergreens, such as the White Pine and Red Cedar. Dense shrubbery and brush piles can also offer good shelter. Natural foods, such as insects, seeds, and fruits are also essential for winter birds. Woody plants furnish insect-laden bark and branches. Leaf litter and brush piles also harbor insects for the birds. Chickadees, Brown Creepers, woodpeckers and kinglets will relish these offerings. The seeds of native flowers and grasses produce an abundant source of seeds for finches, sparrows and juncos. Be sure not to deadhead or cut down these plants in fall. Conifers, birches, and Box Elders also supply seeds through the winter. Fruit-eating birds, such as waxwings and mockingbirds, flock to the long-lasting fruits of Red Cedar, Hackberry, and Hawthorns in winter.

## Bird Baths and Water Gardens

Water, especially dripping water, is a magnet for birds. A birdbath with a dripper is ideal for the small yard. In a larger yard, consider a shallow stream with a small waterfall emptying into a pond, with water recycled through a pump. Be sure to have shallow areas offering several depths, from about ½ inches to 2 inches to accommodate a variety of birds. Warblers, usually hard to see up in the trees, often visit such streams and offer close-up views of their gorgeous plumage. Keep the water moving to avoid mosquitos or add bait minnows to keep them in check. Plant native wetland plants like Blue-Flag Iris and Swamp Milkweed to grace your stream edges. White Water lilies and sedges and other emergent wetland plants will enhance a pond.

By planting native habitats for birds, you'll be able to support and attract many more of the 90% of bird species that never visit feeders. Be ready to grab your binoculars and enjoy the winged beauty just outside your door.

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