

Conifers Help Birds in Winter



Native conifers are handsome and useful, providing winter interest and structure to our gardens. But they also offer many benefits to birds, especially in winter when survival is such a challenge. Birds and other wildlife truly need our help, since so many of their habitats have been lost to development and other causes.

Most conifers are evergreen shrubs or trees whose seeds are held in cones and whose leaves are stiff and needle-like (such as pines), or softer and scaled (like red cedar). Each of the following conifers benefit our native birds by providing critical food, nesting sites, and protection from predators and harsh weather.

Eastern red cedars (*Juniperus virginiana*) are among the first trees to appear in an abandoned field. You also might notice them along I-84. But if you could slow down enough to really look, you'd see that they are beautiful. And cedars are magnets for our treasured birds, butterflies, and moths.

Typically cedars grow 30-40' high by 10-20' wide. They are high branching, which exposes their peeling-bark trunks. Usually their leaves are blue green, but they range in color, sometimes turning bronze in winter.

Each red cedar is either male or female. Females display bluish, berry-like cones in fall and winter, a favorite food of cedar waxwings and many other birds. Thus it is good to plant cedars in groups to ensure that some will bear fruit. Cedar groupings look terrific amongst tall native grasses and wildflowers.

Did Eversource remove trees on your property recently? Consider replacing them with eastern red cedars. Due to their smaller size, they won't interfere with utility cables, and they tolerate air pollution, poor soil, drought, road salts, and wind.

Eastern red cedars attract 38 species of butterflies and moths, including juniper hairstreak and pine elfin. Caterpillars serve as critical food for nestlings. Deer may browse the young foliage, but cedars are considered deer resistant.

Balsam fir (*Abies balsamea*) is a favorite Christmas tree, with its symmetrically conical shape and dark-green leaves that emit a delightful fragrance when brushed against. It grows 50-70' high by 15-25' wide and prefers full sun or part shade in moist, cool soils.

Consider the balsam fir for specimen plantings or screening. The foliage is a beautiful backdrop to shrubs with red fall foliage or berries. You can also plant it with cinnamon ferns and trillium, often found with balsam fir in the wild.

Balsam fir attracts many songbirds: finches, grosbeaks, orioles, warblers, waxwings, and others. Known as a "pollinator powerhouse plant" (PPP), balsam fir is a larval host to over 100 species of moths and butterflies.

Eastern hemlock (*Tsuga canadensis*) is perhaps the most iconic Connecticut conifer. This graceful, elegant tree is incredibly valuable to wildlife, especially songbirds.

Hemlock grows 40-70' high and 25-35' wide but accepts pruning readily. Yet its greatest value to wildlife is its tiny cones, which develop at the tips of its branches.

Hemlock needs moist, well-drained soil in full sun to shade. It can be used as a specimen tree or planted for screening and hedges. It is lovely in a layered woodland garden, among red maple, ferns, and violets—a natural plant community.

Another PPP, hemlock attracts 96 species of moths and butterflies, many songbirds (including finches, owls, chickadees, crossbills, kinglets, etc.), and small mammals. Along streams, hemlock provides important thermal cover for amphibians and fish.

Woolly adelgid, an aphid-like insect who hitched a ride on imported Asian conifers long ago, is, alas, a terrible problem for native hemlocks. Homeowners can be comforted to know that spraying their hemlocks with nontoxic dormant oil once a year or so can keep these valuable trees healthy.

Eastern white pine (*Pinus strobus*) is a large tree, growing 80-150' high by 20-40' wide. In the right location, white pine will be a beautiful addition to your land and valuable to many birds, including chickadees, cedar waxwings, crossbills, juncos, cardinals, finches, and nuthatches. A supreme PPP, it attracts 230 species of butterflies and moths, including the exquisite luna moth and banded purple butterfly.

White pines make handsome specimens, screens, and hedgerows. If you have room, a layered planting with white pines and smaller native trees, shrubs, and ferns or grasses will not only be visually striking but also of great wildlife value.

White pines prefer fertile, moist, well-drained soil, but are adaptable to other conditions. Full sun is best. Avoid planting them close to buildings, because their weak wood and shallow roots make them vulnerable to damage in severe storms.

So enjoy a few conifers in your yard. Time pruning to avoid eliminating the cones, which so many birds and other animals depend on. And see who comes to visit when you provide such excellent food and shelter.