

# ***Creating a Bird Friendly Habitat in Your Own Backyard***

Whether small or large, your yard, patio, balcony, or even rooftop area can play a crucial role in protecting native wildlife by contributing to a critical matrix of suitable habitats buffering and connecting developed spaces to natural areas.

## ***Why is backyard habitat important for birds?***

In recent years, researchers have noticed a significant decline in numbers of migratory song birds. The loss of habitat in breeding grounds, wintering areas and along migratory routes is devastating to migrant as well as resident songbird populations.

Did you know that 75% of the land in the United State is privately owned? Private landowners have a definite hand in the fate of migratory and resident songbirds. Since there are fewer large undisturbed forest tracts, smaller woodlots in individual yards become increasingly important to songbirds.

## ***What do birds need?***

Any size yard or balcony can make an impact on wildlife. The habitat you create needs three essential elements to make it enticing: food, shelter and water. There are many ways to provide all three. Remember that variety is the key to attracting birds to you yard. Whenever possible, offer the birds a choice of different types of plants, feeders and watering stations. A more varied habitat will

time on the ground and are unable to fly but are still being cared for by their parents. It would be a shame to take them away from their parents. Instead, station someone a short distance away to watch and protect the bird while you reference the information at Wildlife Center of Silicon Valley or contact the appropriate wildlife rescue organization listed below.

## **Injured Birds**

If you find an injured bird and can safely pick it up without injury to yourself, place it in a closed cardboard box and put the box in a warm, quiet place. Then, reference the information at Wildlife Center of Silicon Valley.

## ***Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society***

www.scvas.org  
For more information on nest boxes and cavity-nesting species, visit [www.scvas.org/CNRP](http://www.scvas.org/CNRP).

attract more birds. Some birds prefer high tree canopies, others like smaller trees and shrubs, and ground feeders prefer tall grasses or low shrubs in which to hide. Creating an edge effect with trees, shrubs and grasses will also provide the birds with a safe route of travel to food and water sources.

When planning your habitat, think about your neighbor's trees and plants as well as your own. Your neighbor's large evergreen on the edge of your property can work well with your dense shrubbery. The ideal we want to create is a larger connecting habitat for the birds! We recommend planting California native plants because they require less maintenance and can provide food and shelter and can be more attractive to our native birds than exotics. *California Native Plant Society* (CNPS) has lots of information about gardening with natives.

### ***How do you provide food in feeders?***

There are many different types of feeders available through the SCVAS Nature Store and other birding supply stores. Different food served in different feeders attracts different birds. If you want to attract hummingbirds, goldfinches and woodpeckers, you will need to consider three different feeders with three different foods. Seed that is attractive to the birds - try to avoid mixes with Milo, wheat, oats or cracked corn (except for ground feeders who like cracked corn) - is available with shells or without. The shelled seed is comparable to "boneless chicken" in that there is no waste. You only pay for the meat. It is more expensive but more economical because there is no debris and nothing will grow.

### ***How to prevent bird injuries***

One of the hardest things to watch is a bird suffer and die after hitting a window. There are several ways to prevent this occurrence. Window feeders attract the birds to the feeder, not the window. Putting the feeders at least ten feet away from the window gives birds maneuvering room. Using ultra-violet treated decals on the outside of windows advises birds of a barrier.

Millions of songbirds are killed by outdoor cats every year. Millions of cats are killed by cars, other cats or other wildlife every year. Indoor cats live longer. Window feeders or feeders that can be viewed from inside can provide hours of entertainment for the cats and safe feeding for the birds. If there are neighborhood cats that are not under your control, there are several ways of deterring them from catching your birds. If the feeder is hanging from a tree or shepherd's hook, try putting one or two concentric circles of the flexible, garden edging at three- and four-foot diameters under the feeder. The cat has to go up and over and that will give the birds enough time to fly to safety. If cats are hiding under the shrubbery, trim it up so the birds can see under. Put rose bush clippings or commercial "pigeon poker deterrent" under the shrubs.

If you plan to prune trees and clear brush in your yard, the best time for tree maintenance is September to February, to ensure the least disturbance of birds and nests and to lessen the stress on your plants.

### ***Injured Birds and Other Wildlife***

#### **Baby Birds**

If you find what you think is an orphaned baby bird DO NOT PICK IT UP unless it is in immediate danger or looks very young with no feathers. Some fledgling birds spend

**Choose three or more for a regular sized habitat, two for smaller.**

- Tube (with perches along the tube) or Hopper feeder (seed goes in top and comes out the bottom) with sunflower seed or a mix containing sunflower (with shells or without). This attracts most songbirds.
- Nyjer (Thistle) Feeder, can be a sock or other feeder designed for nyjer. It attracts house finches, goldfinches, pine siskins.
- Platform or ground feeder can be hanging, post mounted, or on the ground. Serve millet based mix for doves, sparrows, towhees and juncos.
- Suet can be served in a hanging cage feeder or another feeder designed for suet. Suet is especially welcome during the winter, but blends are available for all year round feeding (look for "no-melt" mixes for summer feeding). It attracts finches, titmice, chickadees, nuthatches, woodpeckers and jays.
- Peanuts can attract chickadees, titmice, nuthatches, woodpeckers, jays and squirrels. There are mesh feeders designed for peanuts, both in-the-shell and out.
- Meal worms can be used in the spring time to provide protein for the nestlings. Many birds only eat protein during certain times of the year. If you are in an area that supports western bluebird populations, meal worms are a good addition. Serve in a small, straight sided dish feeder.
- Nectar feeders for hummingbirds can be out all year long. Orioles are in the lower elevations in the valley from March to September. A mixture of 1 part sugar to 4 parts water best matches

young, but not all birds use nest boxes. Plants and trees provide shelter as well as food. Try to offer the birds some large trees like a conifer or evergreen which can protect them from hot sun, strong wind, or cold temperatures. Dense shrubs and vines offer excellent protection from predators and are often chosen as nesting sites. A brush pile or a log pile is a great hiding place for birds as well. Quail use brush piles for hiding, feeding and nesting. Dead trees or snags attract insects for food and offer nest sites for cavity nesting birds like chickadees, bluebirds, titmice, nuthatches and woodpeckers.

In a small yard or balcony, providing a nest box for likely residents is the best idea. The hole size and the size of box dictates which birds are likely to occupy the box. Some examples of hole sizes:

- House Wren - 1 inch
- Bewick's Wren - 1 inch by 2 inch oval
- Chickadees, titmice and nuthatches - 1-1/4 inch
- Violet-green Swallow, Tree Swallow and Nuthall's Woodpecker - 1-1/2 inch
- Western Bluebird - 1-9/16 inch

Important features of nest boxes include ventilation, drainage, and no perch. There are some nest boxes that can be used exclusively as roosting boxes for the winter or can be converted from winter roosting to summer nesting. Nesting material can also be helpful to nesting birds. Dryer lint, dog and cat hair and short pieces of string or yarn can be put in a mesh bag, plastic basket or suet cage and hung four feet off the ground. Commercial nesting material of sheep's wool and feathers is also available. Nesting shelves can be mounted up close to the eave to attract phoebes, robins, finches and doves.

the natural nectar of flowers. It is important to change the nectar once a week during the winter and every three days during the warmer weather. Do not use soap to clean the feeders, as the residuals cause problems. Hot water or, in the case of a severe mold problem, hot white vinegar do a better job of cleaning and will not harm the birds.

- Fruit stations can be set up with oranges, apples and raisins for orioles, mockingbirds and robins.
- Window feeders come in many styles: hummingbird, platform and hopper. These feeders are a great way to bring birds up close, especially if you are trying to interest children in the natural world. There is nothing like having breakfast with a chickadee or a hummingbird. Make sure that the window is easily accessible from the ground.

Remember to clean all seed feeders regularly. During the rainy months, that can be weekly, during the summer months that can be once. To avoid mold in the rainy season, fill you feeder half as full and twice as often so the seed is fresher. If you ever see caked or smelly food, remove it at once and clean the feeder. If there is an accumulation of droppings, remove and clean the feeder. Cleaning is best done by taking the feeder apart and cleaning it with hot water, Simple Green, enzyme cleaner or a weak dilution of bleach. Rinse well and dry well (a hairdryer can speed things up) before refilling. Some birding supply stores provide a feeder cleaning service for their customers if you are unable to clean the feeders yourself.

### ***How do you provide water?***

All birds need clean water for drinking and bathing. A birdbath is one of the ways you can provide water for them.

It can be as simple as a plant saucer or garbage can lids turned upside down with a few rocks in the center. There are several things to look for when selecting a birdbath. Depth is important. If the bath slopes, it should be no deeper than 3 inches in the center where flat rocks can be placed. If the bath is flat, it should be no deeper than 1-1/2". If the bath slopes, it is helpful if the texture is slightly rough to allow for better footing. Cleaning birdbaths is extremely important, especially in the summer when mosquito proliferation is an issue. There are algaecides and enzyme cleaners that can reduce the instance of green algae or orange sludge and the growth of mosquito larvae. If you have a large bathing bird population, changing the birdbath water on a daily basis is advisable to reduce the spread of any dropping borne diseases. Changing the bath weekly in winter and twice a week in summer is the minimum of birdbath care.

Place the birdbath near (within 10 feet) a trimmed up shrub or some type of cover. Not so close that predators will be able to sneak up on the birds, but close enough for birds to retreat when they have finished bathing. Birds will often spend a long time preening after a bath on a nearby branch. They cannot fly well with wet feathers and are vulnerable to predators.

The sound and sight of moving water is very attractive to birds. This can be achieved in various ways: by adding a dripper or mister to a birdbath from a hose bib; building a pond of any size with a waterfall or other flat bathing surface; or, by a re-circulating water feature in a birdbath or fountain.

### ***How do you provide shelter?***

Birds need shelter from the weather and from predators. They also need places to build their nests and raise their