



Igniting Fascination Through **BIRDSCAPING**

Story & Photos by
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PREPARE TO BE DELIGHTED WHEN YOU INVITE BIRDS INTO YOUR YARD.

AS I ENTERED THE LIVING WORLD OF MY BACKYARD on a July morning, the flute-like melody of a wood thrush drifted up the hill from the dark woodlot. Then, as I wandered along, a ruby-throated hummingbird, no bigger than a strawberry, flashed before my eyes. Its emerald green feathers shimmered in the sun like mermaid scales as it hovered at the trumpet honeysuckle that laces the garden trellis. With wings beating at 80 hits a second, this yard fairy disappeared as fast as it appeared.

In the wildflower meadow full of wild bergamot, I watched a hummingbird clearwing moth—one of the fastest flying insects in the world, clocking speeds of 33 miles per hour. Overhead, an American goldfinch as bright as a Meyer lemon flushed from the dew-cradling leaves of the Virginia cup plant. Two newly fledged gray catbirds—round balls of fluff with charmingly stubby tails—sat in a nearby rhododendron making high pitched calls to their parents in the hopes of getting a third or fourth breakfast.

My bird feeders had turned into a nursery: baby downy woodpeckers with telltale red foreheads clambering around the suet, two baby cardinals now fending for themselves after learning about the buffet from their parents, and even a few juvenile eastern bluebirds with fresh plumage showcasing a constellation of starry white speckles. My backyard hosted a stunning show.

NURTURE NATURE

These and other marvels can be yours when you consciously invite birds and other creatures into your yard. Note that we're talking real animals, not Pokémon Go fantasy creatures. Perhaps the lure of the new augmented reality Pokémon craze is the child-like joy of igniting our fascination in a world that has grown austere. But isn't finding a luna moth resting on a black walnut tree just as fantastic as finding Pikachu?

Managing our backyards for wildlife is more important than ever. Biodiversity levels are plummeting below "safe levels" while mental health issues are on the rise. We need nature and nature needs us.

There are personal benefits as well. Studies show that just 30 minutes of nature a week can reduce your risk of depression and high blood pressure. The root of this benefit may be the simple fact that when we're out in nature our involuntary attention (read: fascination) is ignited. In other words, our eyes catch the fluttering butterfly wing and our mind follows, in stark contrast to the voluntary attention our desk jobs demand of our minds all day.

Nature has the healing power to fascinate, yet the U.S. is losing 1.5 million acres of land to development each year. Lawns alone cover 40 million acres but absorb about 80 million pounds of pesticides each year.



Pileated Woodpecker, searching for food
PHOTO: MIKE ROSENGARTEN



Hummingbird Clearwing Moth can fly 33 mph.



Young Eastern Bluebird grows to be colorful.
See photo at right.

BIRDSCAPING & NATIVE PLANTS

What if we all took to birdscaping on those 40 million acres?

Birdscaping, or managing your yard to attract birds, really starts with plants. A native oak tree supports 530 native butterfly and moth species that use it as a host for caterpillars, while a non-native species, like ginkgo, support only about five species. Caterpillars and other insects are a hugely important food source for birds especially during breeding and migration periods. So by selecting native trees, shrubs and perennials you're creating a large virtual bird feeder in your yard.

It's a good idea to select trees and shrubs of different heights—like tall cherry trees, understory dogwoods and evergreen holly—to promote diversity. A variety of plants gives birds a variety of insects, berries that ripen at different times of the year, and plentiful levels of habitat for different nesting preferences.

If you have a sunny spot in your yard, planting native wildflowers among the lawn grass is a beautiful way to support beneficial insects and birds. Plus, it cuts down on mowing, as meadows should be mown only once in the spring and left alone in fall and winter months to provide shelter and seed sources. Choose flowers that bloom at different times across the seasons to provide nectar for hummingbirds and butterflies.

My meadow's florescence begins with beardtongue in June, followed by the native sunflowers, Joe-Pye weed and wild bergamot in July, then the goldenrod and asters from late summer into fall. The more native plants you have in your yard, the less need you'll have for pesticides because natives promote a healthy balance of predator and prey insects.

MORE BIRDSCAPING IDEAS

In addition to providing food for birds, consider other desirable habitat features

to add to your yard. Birds need fresh water all year long, even in winter, to maintain their metabolism, so a water feature or simple birdbath (with a heater in winter) would be welcomed, especially near bird feeders.

Leaving dead trees standing or fallen is also helpful as they provide nesting cavities and food sources for woodpeckers.

I'd recommend going to Yardmap.org for articles on birdscaping with native plants, making "messy" look good and other habitat features and ideas.

Now please excuse me while I run out to catch that eight-spotted forester in my birdscape of fascination. ♦

Willistown Conservation Trust is a nonprofit land trust that's protected over 7,200 acres of wildlife habitat in the Willistown area. Its mission is to inspire a lifelong love of the land through education. The Rushton Farm bird banding station in Newtown Square is open to the public through November. Learn more at WCTrust.org.



Eastern Towhees nesting in a low shrub



Birds, like these male Eastern Bluebirds, need water year-round.