

Creating a Safe Garden for Birds

Getting Started

Acid or Alkaline

- Map your garden and decide where to locate flower beds, thickets, bird feeders, etc.
- Determine soil and light conditions and choose plants accordingly.
- Use native plants as much as possible.
- Choose shrubs and trees to provide both food and nest sites.
- Mix various trees and shrubs, vines and flowers in order to create layers because different birds feed and nest at different heights.
- Plant in groups rather than in straight lines.
- Plant densely to provide safer, warmer shelter and nesting sites.
- Use ground covers in place of lawn; consider vines for this purpose in parts of the garden.
- Embrace untidiness! Nature is disorderly -- emulate! Don't deadhead until spring, mulch well with leaves, stack fallen and cut branches to create a brush pile.

Thickets, Edges and More

Use both seed- and berry-producing shrubs and trees when planting the following:

- Hedgerows provide food, shelter and nest sites. If your garden is big enough, intersperse shrubs with a few trees.
- Thickets are groups of densely planted shrubs and/or small trees.
- Edges are where two types of habitat meet. Such edges are very attractive to birds. You can emulate this 'edge effect' in your garden by alternating thickets and hedgerows with open areas.

Making Sure Your Garden Is Safe for Birds

- Don't use chemicals.
- Keep cats inside or control them when they are outside.
- Locate feeders and baths near shelter for the birds but not near enough for cats to hide in the shelter and attack.
- Help prevent birds from hitting windows by hanging ribbons, CDs, or mobiles in front of the glass, or by using one of the many other means of deterring window kills.

What Do Birds Need?

Food

- Plant a variety of native seed- and berry-producing plants.
- Choose species that produce food at different times of the year. Don't forget to plant nectar sources for hummingbirds.
- Many birds eat insects. Plant flowers attractive to insects and you will add more diversity to your garden.
- Gather some dead logs and make a log pile in a corner of your garden, or leave a standing dead tree (which is called a snag) if it is safe to do so. Birds will appreciate the insects found in them.
- Supplement the natural food sources with bird feeders. Provide a variety of seed, suet and fruit.
- During summer, maintain a hummingbird feeder (make sure you clean it frequently and well).

Shelter

- Birds need safe shelter, whether from predators or inclement weather.
- Hedgerows and thickets provide great cover and nesting sites.
- Conifers offer warmth, hiding places and nest sites.
- Instant shelter is created by making a brush pile. Gather pruned or fallen branches from your own trees and layer them to a height of about one metre. Situate the pile in a corner, against a fence or by a hedge.
- Thick tangles of vines trained over a fence or allowed to climb the side of a house also offer cover and roost sites for birds.
- Snags attract woodpeckers who, while probing for insects, create cavities. The cavities offer warm, insulated winter cover.
- If snags are not practical, provide roosting boxes. These are similar to nest boxes but they contain two or three perches inside to accommodate several or more birds.
- Nest boxes left up all winter will offer birds some respite from the cold.

Water

- Place a large clay saucer on a tree stump or on the ground near shrubbery, a safe distance from places where predators might hide.



Water (continued)

- Whether a clay saucer or ready-made bird bath, look for one with a rough surface and shallow bowl.
- The bath must be big enough to allow a bird to bathe as well as to drink.
- Place a flat rock in the middle of the bath to serve as a perch. Its upper surface should rise a bit above the surface of the water.
- Clean bird baths frequently and replace water every couple of days.

Nest Sites

- Finding a safe place to nest can be tough. Birds may nest in inappropriate places for lack of anything better, and success in such places is precarious.
- Snags offer natural sites for cavity-nesting birds such as chickadees, wrens, tree swallows and woodpeckers.
- Bird boxes offer a good alternative. Different species require different sizes of boxes and entrance holes. Make sure they are well constructed and well ventilated. Never place a perch under the entrance hole because doing so offers a place for predators to stand, making it easier for them to grab eggs or young birds.
- Locate your bird houses in safe places that are not easily accessible to predators.
- Provide nesting material for birds. Use dog hair, short lengths of wool and thread, bits of fabric, lint from the clothes dryer and feathers. Stuff these into an empty wire suet holder and hang from a branch.