

Massachusetts Div. of Fisheries & Wildlife shares tips on attracting songbirds to your yard

Which birds do you spot on your walks or visit your yard? Do you do anything to attract them like leave out a bird bath, a birdhouse, some seed? Have any pictures of the visits?

Have you ever wondered how to attract songbirds to your yard WITHOUT birdseed? Planting natural food sources creates great birdwatching opportunities without attracting unintended wildlife like bears, coyotes, or rodents.

MassWildlife strongly advises the public to avoid providing supplemental food for wildlife—that includes backyard bird feeders. Feeding birds and other wildlife can often cause more harm than good. Feeding wildlife at any time of year teaches them to rely on humans for food, which puts them at a disadvantage for survival. Bird feeders may increase mortality from window strikes and predation by pet cats, some of the largest sources of wild bird mortality in North America. Supplemental feeding also congregates wildlife into unnaturally high densities, which increases the risk of spreading a variety of bacterial and viral diseases among birds. Bird feeders often draw wildlife other than songbirds including bears, coyotes, wild turkeys, and rodents closer to homes.

The good news is that bird and nature lovers can attract birds naturally throughout the year by adding native plants, bird houses, or bird baths. Read the suggestions below to create a

bird-friendly yard.

Food

To attract birds naturally, first you need to attract insects. Birds, like the common chickadee, require native trees and plants close to their nest in order to find enough insects to feed their nestlings. To attract more birds to your back yard native fruit-bearing shrubs (like those listed below) are essential, both for the fruit and the insect fauna they support.

Insect friendly and therefore bird friendly vegetation that you can plant in your own yard:

- Oaks—white oaks are the best species to promote native insects
- Black willow and pussy willow
- Black cherry and common chokecherry
- Birches
- Dogwoods
- Hollies
- Elderberry
- Mulberry
- Juniper
- Viburnums
- Shadbush/serviceberry/amalachier
- Blackberry, raspberry, blueberry, and aronia berry

A healthy mix of native vegetation will draw a variety of species to your yard. Native trees and shrubs that produce berries (like dogwoods, serviceberries, cherries, blueberry) provide fruit in summer and/or fall and are much more nutritious (high in fats and lipids) than fruits of non-native plants. During the summer when birds are nesting, the young are fed almost exclusively invertebrates like caterpillars. Native plants support a much higher diversity and number of invertebrates than non-native plants. This is especially true with caterpillars, which are the preferred food for young

songbirds. Growing native plants in your yard can be the best way to attract many species of birds to the area and increase nesting success for chickadees and other species.

Are you looking to attract hummingbirds? Native species of wild bergamot and red columbine have colorful, tubular flowers that will entice hummingbirds and butterflies! You might also include trumpet honeysuckle, cardinal flower, spotted impatiens, Canada lily, and native azaleas and rhododendrons.

Find a list of native plants to attract birds to your yard by soil type and sunlight preference [here](#)..

Water

Birds need water for drinking and bathing. To enhance your garden for birds, add a source of water for them like a birdbath or fountain. They are especially attracted to moving to dripping water. Ideally, the water level in artificial birdbaths should be no more than 2 inches deep. A gradual decrease in depth towards the edges allows birds of all sizes to drink and bathe in the depth they prefer. A water drip or wiggler may be added to create the sight and sound of moving water, while deterring mosquitoes. Water should be replaced weekly to keep it clean.



Massachusetts Div. of Fisheries & Wildlife photo.

Shelter

Shelter is as critically important as food and water. Birds need a safe place to rest, preen their feathers, and escape when predators are present. Each night, birds settle into dense shrubs or coniferous trees to sleep. Providing these refuges in your yard is another way to attract birds. Consider adding wood or wicker bird houses for nesting in the summer and roosting during cold winter nights.

Additional tips

We all like to keep a well-maintained yard. But birds like things a little more on the wild side! Leave small piles of branches and leaves around your yard. These will attract ground-dwelling invertebrates—perfect for birds like American

robins and northern flickers. The brush piles provide shelter for bird species like the Carolina wren. Decomposing piles will replenish nutrients to your soil over time. When possible, don't cut down dead trees, also called snags. Snags are favored foraging and nesting places for many species of birds.