

It's Not Just for the Birds – Creating a Backyard Habitat by Nancy Seppala

You've all seen it happen and you've felt the loss. One day a forest stands tall and green. The next day it's gone and in its place stretches a housing development. Humans can use those houses but what about all the displaced animals, birds and insects? Their habitat has been devastated and unless replaced this wildlife will not survive.

The good news is that you can help replace their lost habitat in your own yards, even if they are of the postage-stamp variety. The Canadian Wildlife Federation (CWF) has a program which will guide you in planning and planting a haven for wildlife – not only wild mammals and birds but also reptiles, amphibians, plants, invertebrates, fungi and other organisms. When you have finished, you can apply to have your yard certified as a backyard habitat.

To receive this certification your yard must provide food, water, shelter and space for various kinds of wildlife. The mix of plants you choose must include native species – those which have been in this region for centuries and upon which local wildlife has grown dependent. When applying for certification you must complete a form describing the yard, including aspects which attract wildlife, and attach sketches and photos of key features.



Last year I applied for and obtained this certification. Along with the certificate came a green and white metal sign with an orange butterfly winging through the words "Certified Backyard Habitat." I am very proud of this sign which tells others that my garden is a safe and welcoming environment for wildlife. It has been a joy developing this refuge and I hope that if you note the following suggestions you too will enjoy replacing lost habitat.

Offering food is easy. In addition to my birdfeeder, several trees, shrubs and flowers provide nectar, berries, seeds and cones. I was thrilled to observe a flock of cedar waxwings in my serviceberry (*Amelanchier canadensis*), a tree which fits very nicely into a small yard. In three days they had picked off

all the fruit. I allow a few milkweed plants to feed the Monarch butterfly larvae, while parsley and Queen Anne's lace nourish the Black Swallowtail larvae. Purple coneflower (*Echinacea*) and *Verbena bonariensis* provide nectar for the butterflies while chickadees and goldfinches eat the sunflower and other seeds. A giant pileated woodpecker has

found the suet in my feeder. Even the occasional hawk raids my garden hoping to catch a small bird unawares. It isn't only birds and butterflies which visit my garden. I see other creatures such as toads, frogs and garter snakes. Red squirrels abound as they thrive on the cones of my spruce trees, and chipmunks, rabbits and deer visit to hunt for food.

Although a pond would be a lovely way to provide water, I have two birdbaths instead. One sits on my patio where I have watched birds practically line up for their daily splash. The other is in my wildflower garden which provides a more secluded spot for shyer birds. Many insects and squirrels also stop to sip the bathwater! I wash and refill these baths every other day to keep them from breeding mosquitoes. To keep any neighbourhood cats from pouncing on bathing birds, I have had to erect a small fence around the patio birdbath.

Different native shrubs and trees such as nannyberry (*Viburnum lentago*), sumac (*Rhus typhina*), and white pine (*Pinus strobus*) provide shelter as well as food. The denser the foliage the better hidden the creatures are from predators. A brush pile sits amongst a grove of eastern white cedar (*Thuja occidentalis*) and looks to be home for chipmunks and rabbits. Upon turning over some of the logs I see all kinds of insects, snails, slugs, spiders, beetles and creatures for which I have no names. Several rock piles also provide shelter for small mammals as well as amphibians and reptiles.

Space is the final criterion when developing your garden. Many animals are territorial and depending on the species, enough space gives them their own required area. CWF tells us that birds see a yard as a three-dimensional space. Tall trees, medium height shrubs and lower ground covers all increase the amount of space used by birds. I am reminded of the importance of groundcover when I walk into my overgrown wildflower garden and numerous small birds fly up from where they were hidden.

Since insecticides and herbicides can harm creatures in the garden and leach out into our waterways, CWF asks us not to use them. It is ludicrous to attract wildlife and then spray poison believing it will only harm the bad guys.

Variety is the spice of life and this is certainly true when creating your backyard habitat. A vast green lawn surrounded by a cedar hedge may attract little more than a few grubs and birds. When planning your habitat, include different trees, shrubs, flowers and grasses. Provide various sheltering materials such as rocks and brush piles as well as a source of water. Remember, the wildlife won't care if your yard isn't picture perfect. And perhaps when your neighbours see the richness and variety of your yard, they will be inspired to follow your example.

Nowadays, when natural environments are rapidly being lost to development, you too can do your part to help protect wildlife. For more information on creating your own backyard habitat, contact The Canadian Wildlife Federation at <http://cwf-fcf.org>.