

## Improving Your Land for Wildlife

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It's been a mild winter so far and I haven't seen the crazy antics of my "furry birds" (a.k.a. squirrels) as they leap from the tree to the bird feeder attempting to dislodge each other from the prime feeding location. I feed them more for my own amusement than for their benefit, and, occasionally I actually do have a bird or two stop by to eat.

Judging by the number of birdfeeders I see, I am not alone in my fondness for my wild neighbors.

Beyond filling our feeders and birdbaths, there are other things we can do to improve the habitat for our resident and migratory birds and other wildlife. All animals need food, water, shelter and space which together make up their habitat. Some wildlife have very specific habitat requirements that need to be met for them to survive and thrive in an area, while others can more readily adapt to their surroundings.

While feeding the birds gives us a good feeling and allows us opportunities to see them, feeding is most helpful when it supplements their natural food supplies. There are many things you can do to help our birds and other wildlife meet their needs throughout the year by improving their habitat on your property (large or small).

The first thing to do is to look at what you already have for habitat features, thinking in terms of food, water, shelter and space components.

Nature provides food for wildlife throughout the seasons. As we develop and alter the landscape with roads, houses and lawns, much of this natural habitat is lost. You can take an inventory of what your land is providing and enhance the components that are lacking.

Many birds rely on fruits and seed when insects are dormant. Ensuring that you have a variety of plants growing in and around your yard to provide these seeds and fruits throughout the year can help birds and other wildlife more easily meet their needs. Some plants such as shadbush (also called serviceberry), black raspberries, and red and silver maple produce seed and fruits in the spring and early summer when birds are expending energy looking for mates and building nests. Other plants, such as dogwoods, black cherry, beech, viburnums, and white and red oak, produce fruits, seeds and nuts in the fall when birds are fattening up in preparation for winter. Still others such as winterberry, staghorn sumac, and many crab apple varieties provide fruits that persist on the branches throughout the winter and provide food for wildlife during their most difficult time.

Apple trees are utilized by many wildlife species, so keeping these trees healthy and productive is of great value to wildlife.

Other trees such as white pine and hemlock provide both food and shelter for birds and other wildlife. Black-capped chickadees, pine siskens, crossbills, and red squirrels feed on the seeds, while the branches provide protection from harsh winter weather and from predators.

In the spring and summer, many birds rely on insects to feed their young. Having diverse vegetation encourages a variety of insects that our birds and other wildlife dine on. You may want to consider allowing some of your lawn to grow up into a more meadow like condition – full of what we would call weeds. The grasses, goldenrod and other plants that will thrive will attract seed eating birds, rabbits and small mammals as well as insects which many species of birds then feed to their young. Creating meadow-like areas (mowed once a year or every other year) provides habitat for the insects that make up the diets of much of our wildlife in the summer.

Lastly, leaving dead and dying trees where they do not pose a risk to safety provides insects for woodpeckers who excavate cavities in search of these tasty treats. These cavities are then used by many other birds and animals for shelter and nesting. Fallen logs and brush piles can also offer shelter and protection.

Do you have a wetland on your property? According to the US Forest Service, wetlands and shore areas are used by over 90% of NH's wildlife species, and of those, 40% use wetlands as their preferred habitat.

Once you know what you have on your property, you can look for ways to enhance those habitat features. You may decide to plant some fruiting shrubs or evergreens to enhance the food and cover you have. If you have forest land, you may release some of your oak and beech trees so they will produce more acorns and beechnuts. But most of all enjoy the opportunity to see and appreciate all of the creatures with whom we share the land.

For our fact sheets, *New Hampshire's Native Trees, Shrubs and Vines with Wildlife Value* and *Wildlife Habitat Improvement: Woodlands and Wildlife*, or if you have any questions, please call UNH Cooperative Extension at 539-3331.

The Carroll County UNH Cooperative Extension Office is located in Center Ossipee at 75 Main Street. In addition to the Forestry and Wildlife, Extension has educators, programs, and materials in Agricultural Resources, Family and Consumer Resources, 4-H Youth Development and Nutrition Connections available through the Carroll County Office

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