

Landscaping for Wildlife

Do you ever pause enraptured by a soaring birdsong, or trace a butterfly's flight among the flowers and want to encourage their visits to your garden? Or perhaps saddened as wildlands disappear, you wish to landscape to provide replacement habitat for these wild birds, animals and insects. Is it possible?

Those of us who are lucky enough to live near open space can certainly invite visitors who live in the wilder areas by providing water, food and shelter. Install a shallow birdbath, preferably unfrozen in the winter. An area with wet soil, or a very shallow edge to the birdbath will provide water for butterflies. Both birds and butterflies appreciate sunny shelter from the wind and protection from cats and other predators. Food for butterflies is simple; many flowers provide the nectar that sustains them through their brief life. Birds eat a wide variety of foods, ranging from seeds and fruit, to insects and carrion. There are many books, as well as local bird lovers, which can help you. For the rest of us, the question is whether we can provide habitat where wildlife can live, not just visit.

It is possible to do so for many wild animals, but not all. Much of the wildlife we are losing cannot find homes in our backyards. Foxes and mountain lions, along with most predators, need large areas to roam. Grassland birds need unbroken expanses of prairie in order to nest safely. Nevertheless, there can be great world of life in our backyard, although perhaps not what we expect. I have come to the inescapable conclusion that the most diverse, numerous and interesting wildlife in my backyard are insects.

Somehow, when we picture landscaping for wildlife, we see relaxing under a tree watching songbirds and colorful butterflies. The reality is more complex. If you make your yard more inviting to wildlife you may be inviting "suburban-life". Growing fruiting bushes for birds may well attract skunks or raccoons. In addition, wildlife landscaping means living with all of the inhabitants of a healthy ecosystem including spiders, caterpillars, and aphids...many creatures we are used to avoiding. And if we encourage "wildness" by simply not tending our yards, the weeds of the world will probably overrun us: often plants and animals from

Europe and Asia. Most of our yards and neighbors are so far from a natural state that native plants and animals need careful attention and care to thrive, at least in the beginning. The easiest approach to wildlife gardening may be to shift from being a gardener to being a backyard naturalist, and to use some fundamental ideas from ecology. In general, healthy eco-systems are diverse and complex: there are many kinds of life and they interact in a variety of different ways. From this we know to plant a wide variety of plants, perhaps mimicking plants and patterns we see in nearby wildlands. In addition, we are more ignorant than we are knowledgeable about how ecosystems work. Rather than think we can control and manage a wildlife yard - as we would a smooth green lawn - we are most likely to provide habitat by tolerating some disorder and ambiguity. Perhaps it helps to look at it all from the perspective of a bird. Those aphids we so despise are a nourishing treat for migrating sparrows, and that pile of leaves and twigs left from last fall is now a home to snakes, pollinating bees and overwintering ladybugs. Conversely, that tidy lawn provides virtually no food or shelter for any kind of life.

Even those of us who are willing to take large steps towards becoming backyard naturalists generally need to make some concessions to family and neighbors (and our own sense of aesthetics). One of the hardest things about providing habitat in your backyard can be tolerating the ambiguity and...yes...messiness that is often involved. Can you find places in your yard for the unseen mysteries of the wild? Can you allow some of your flowers to go to seed to feed the autumn birds? Each one of us will play with a balance that we enjoy. One approach is to have a cultivated garden in the front yard, but allow the furthest reaches of the yard to become wilder. Another strategy is to create some structure with fences, walks, mowed paths, boulder outcrops and/or hedges which will allow an otherwise wild yard to meet suburban stands of order.