

Backyard Wildlife Habitats
By: Linda K. Schneider

Success! Mama wild turkey has nested in the backyard and now she is bringing her little ones out to feed in the freshly cut grass. What a joy it is and a privilege to see this young mother with her brood, up close and personal. Dream Come True Farm in Hartland, Vermont is Habitat #33885.

Do you know about the Backyard Wildlife Habitat Program from National Wildlife Federation? Simply put; supply the four main ingredients and wildlife will come to live in YOUR backyard.

1. Water
2. Food
3. Shelter/cover
4. Nesting materials

National Wildlife Federation will even certify your backyard if you qualify. Over 30,000 backyards, large and small, all over the United States already are active members of this program, as well as over 2,000 Schoolyard Habitats. To learn more visit www.nwf.org/bwh or www.nwf.org/schoolyardhabitats/. Seasonal newsletters keep you abreast of new information. Birding and butterfly kits are available to make your job easier. Free courses are available at www.nwf.org/wildlifeuniversity

At first the thought of joining this program seemed silly; after all I live in Vermont for Heaven's sake! The wild animals are everywhere in Vermont. But as development fast becomes a reality, habitat for wildlife is shrinking. These animals are going to have to adapt to the development and accept it, just like people must learn to do. What choice do we have? Move? Relocate to where - Wyoming? I'm not ready to give up Vermont just yet!

The large tracts of undisturbed land for the antelope to roam just don't exist anymore; someone has put a house there! Have you noticed lately, houses seem to be built in places we didn't think they would or could!?! Small, welcoming backyard wildlife habitats might be a worthwhile answer to this problem.

Mine started by planting trees, shrubs and perennials for the birds, called "birdscaping". The rule is to mimic nature, tall trees in the back, medium sized shrubs, and finally small perennials down in front. It grew from there to add wildlife, with just a few additions. As the grapes ripen, it is a race to see who will eat them first, the ermine or us. The American Cranberry bushes bring the waxwings, ruffed grouse, wild turkey and occasionally deer.

Not conventional foundation plantings, my American Cranberry bushes are probably placed a little too close to the house by most people's standards. However, I beg to differ, in the spring when flocks of birds show up at my windows. The berries have stayed on all winter, freezing and thawing and refreezing. This process must ferment the berries and add flavor! Viewing can take place from the first and second story windows. While the ruffed grouse hang out close to the ground to feel safe in this shelter, the small song birds head to the top of this twelve foot high bush to feed.

Recipe for Success

Grow native plants for food and shelter
Add water
Stir in a few plants as nesting materials
Don't be too neat, leave a brush pile as a hiding place
Watch what will show up when you supply the right ingredients!

Tips for Success

FOOD SOURCES should be native species of plants grown for the native birds. They know what to do with these plants. Native birds have been surviving on these food sources for centuries. (Serviceberry, Pine, Oaks, Sumac, Elderberry)

Keep invasive plants out of your yard. Rose Paul from The Vermont Nature Conservancy says, "Invasive species like Buckthorn are 'junk food' for the birds. There is little or no nutritional value in these plants." Invasive species strangle out the native plants.

Hedgerows provide **SHELTER**. Leave the brush pile in the backyard. Small animals will hide and possibly nest in this pile.

WATER must be available at all times. Bird baths will work. Moving water is preferred, such as ponds and streams.

Provide **NESTING MATERIALS** for birds and animals. Plant a willow tree and thistles as nesting materials. The American Goldfinch waits until the thistles have gone to seed before she builds her nest. The Hummingbirds use willow-down to line their nests.

Remember to keep your pet **cat indoors**. While she loves the song birds as much as you do, she loves them as dinner!

Vermont Department of Fish and Wildlife and your local Conservation District can help with more information about these programs. To order a \$3.00 book titled; *Backyard Wildlife Habitat in Vermont*, call 802-241-3700. To get on the mailing list for *Habitat Highlights Newsletter* call 802-241-1454 or email fwinformation@anr.state.vt.us

When you plant for the birds and wildlife, the rewards are yours to enjoy on a daily basis. Visits from creatures great and small, feathered and scaled, antlered and... you get the picture.

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