



College of Agricultural, Consumer & Environmental
Sciences

Illinois Extension

ILRiverHort 

Create a bird-friendly yard

October 4, 2021

[Nicole Flowers-Kimmerle](#)



North America has lost 3 billion birds since 1970, according to a study from the [Cornell Lab of Ornithology](#). This is a 30% decrease.

This statistic may feel devastating and overwhelming, but you don't have to feel helpless. There are some simple things that you can do to make your yard bird-friendly.

With habitat loss and degradation being the most significant contributors to population decline, the good news is that even small green spaces can provide the four things that birds need to thrive: food, cover, water, and space.

Food

Landscape plants provide the food birds need to survive and raise their young and diversity is key. Seeds, nuts, berries, and the insects plants attract are all important sources of nourishment.

Young birds eat more than you might think. Even small adult birds, the chickadee, for example, need 6,000 caterpillars to raise a clutch of young birds.

Adding plants that provide food for caterpillars ensures an important food source for growing birds. Native trees, including oak, willow, cherry, plum, and birch can support many different caterpillar species. Herbs and native perennials, such as butterfly weed, violets, and dill are also host plants for caterpillars.

Berries, nuts, and seeds are other essential food sources that provide calories to help birds prepare for overwintering or migration. Several native shrub varieties provide berries. Serviceberry, also known as Juneberry, produces berries in the early summer. Other native species, such as red twig dogwood, elderberry, viburnum, and spicebush yield berries throughout summer. Holly, chokecherry, hawthorn, and crabapple have fruit that stays on the branches, providing food all winter long.

Common sources for nuts and seeds include oak, hickory, beech, maple, and birch trees. Spruce, pine, and fir trees provide pine nuts as well as year-round shelter for birds. Herbaceous plants, such as coneflower, aster, sunflower, and goldenrod provide seeds if left in the garden until spring.

Cover

A bird-friendly yard must have cover for shelter and nesting sites. The dense structure of willow, hawthorn, holly, and conifer trees provides valuable protection. Milkweeds, native thistles, cinnamon ferns, and asters produce soft, fluffy material that many bird species use to build nests.

Water

Adding water to your landscape will also attract birds. Small ponds with uneven edges and shallow spaces provide a place for birds to drink, splash, and bathe. A small pump will keep water moving and reduce mosquito concerns.

For a less permanent option, try a birdbath. Change the water every two to three days and clean the bath with a scrub brush once a week to keep the water clean, healthy, and mosquito-free.

Space

A final element to consider is space. Wildlife feel more at home in layered, densely planted areas, so I recommend leaving part of a yard unmanicured.

Careful consideration for food, cover, water, and space in your yard will provide much-needed habitat for a variety of bird species. Even small changes can make a significant difference in supporting bird populations.

MEET THE AUTHOR

[Nicole Flowers-Kimmerle](#) is a Agriculture and Natural Resources (Horticulture) Educator for Fulton, Mason, Peoria and Tazewell counties. She completed a bachelors of science degree in crop science at the University of Illinois, and a master's of science degree in agronomy with an emphasis in weed science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. She has also worked at Montana State University as a research associate where she worked on weed control in sugar beets and barley. She taught high school chemistry and other science classes where she was able to teach students in both the school garden and greenhouse. She works with both the Extension Master Gardeners and Extension Master Naturalists.

ABOUT THE BLOG

[ILRiverHort](#) is a blog that helps people connect to nature and grow.

GARDENERS CORNER

This article also appeared in Gardener's Corner, Summer 2021. [Gardener's Corner](#) is a quarterly newsletter from the Illinois Extension team of horticulture experts. Each issue highlights best practices that will make your houseplants, landscape or garden shine in any season.

Photo by [Dan Wayman](#) on [Unsplash](#)