

GARDENING TO ATTRACT BIRDS

I live in Parker County, approximately six miles east of Weatherford. Since moving here in 1977, I have kept a yard life list of species seen, and have found this to greatly enhance the fun of yard birding and gardening. Some of the better birds I have seen are Lazuli Bunting (the first documented sighting in Parker County), Mourning Warbler, Red-headed Woodpecker, Gray Catbird, and Yellow-bellied Sapsucker. My yard life list now is at 127 bird species.



Lazuli Bunting

I am always looking for ways to make my yard more attractive to birds by providing habitat that meets their needs. These include: 1) Food, 2) Water (especially during a severe drought, such as we are having now [3/2009]), and 3) Cover.

For food, I maintain a variety of feeders, as well as native plantings. I feed thistle seed (Goldfinches, Pine Siskins, House Finches, and Chickadees), suet (Woodpeckers), and a seed mix (Cardinals, Blue Jays, Chickadees, Titmice, House Sparrows [yuk!], et al). Recently, White-winged Doves have invaded, pigging-out on the seed mix. A simple wire-mesh cage over the platform feeder has been effective in keeping them out, but still allows the smaller birds to feed.

I am still working to enhance my native plantings, but I have had good success with:

Yaupon Holly (be sure to buy female plants): Cedar Waxwings, Mockingbirds.

Possumhaw: Ditto.

Cedar Elm: Chickadees and migrating Warblers love to forage on the leaves; these trees must have lots of insects.

Salvia greggii: Hummingbirds and butterflies.

Eupatorium greggii: A magnet for Monarch butterflies during their fall migration.

Turk's Cap: Hummingbirds.

Chinese Pistachio (female): This is not a native, but in the fall the berries attract a variety of birds.

Pecan: The frequent invasions of tent caterpillars and other caterpillars provide a veritable feast for Yellow-billed Cuckoos.

Hackberry: Can be rather ugly, but is a great tree for birds. They love the berries, and the tree attracts lots of bugs for the birds.

For water, I have a dripping birdbath and have installed a fishpond with a waterfall and stream. The plantings for this is a constant work in progress, but "tweaking" on this is a lot of fun. This feature has attracted several bird species new or rarely seen before in my yard: Hermit Thrush, Gray Cat Bird, Wilson's Warbler, Nashville Warbler, Brown Thrasher. The pond has gold fish

and koi, and of course, toads and leopard frogs (even a small water snake last year.) In the spring the toads and frogs provide a choral symphony to sing us to sleep at night. This might irritate some people, but we love it. Until recently we had avoided the heron problem, but a Great Blue Heron has finally discovered the pond. One morning I saw him gulp down a six-inch goldfish. Luckily he has only reduced the fish population, not eliminated it. I'm sure that during this spring's spawning season, the fish will recover. Nature tends to reach equilibrium.

For cover, one of the best features one can provide is a brush pile. If you are one who values a neat, well-groomed yard, this may look like an eyesore, but the birds love it! Locate it close to your feeders so that the birds have a safe haven to go to before and after visiting the feeders. Once I observed a Cooper's Hawk digging down into my brush pile trying (unsuccessfully) to get a bird that had fled there for safety.

I also have installed nesting boxes, which have attracted Bluebirds, Bewick's Wrens and Titmice.

The invasion of Oak Wilt in Parker County has left several dead trees standing in my yard. If these do not threaten any structures, I leave them standing. They provide wonderful places for Woodpeckers to forage, as well as perching sites for many birds, such as Mississippi Kite. A pair of Red-shouldered Hawks has nested in the neighborhood for the last few seasons. Since they have arrived, the Fox Squirrel population has been balanced. I think these are my wife's favorite birds.

Projects currently underway include creating a pocket prairie and a hummingbird/butterfly garden with native grasses and wildflowers. After two growing seasons, I now have good representations of the big four tall-grass prairie grasses: Big Blue Stem, Little Blue Stem, Indian Grass and Switch Grass. I am amazed at how attractive these grasses are when they bloom in the fall. I hope that they eventually attract our winter sparrows. Last fall I was pleased to observe several Chipping Sparrows feeding in the grasses.

So, if you enjoy birds, I encourage you to do what you can to make your little piece of the world friendlier to birds. It can make a big difference for our feathered friends and provides almost endless joy for the gardener.

Text and photos of birds provided by
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