

# ONE GOOD TERN

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## Managing a backyard for wildlife

can be a pleasant diversion that pays compound dividends. Even familiar critters can put on a fascinating show; all you have to do to enjoy it is look out the window (commercial-free and no cable bills!)

The basic components of any habitat are fairly simple: shelter, food, and water. The amount of space required is up to you, and it needn't be devoted entirely to wildlife, since the principles of habitat design do not preclude other uses. In fact, having a functioning ecosystem in the back yard is the best pest control program available!

Start by deciding what you want to manage *for*, then do some research. For example, a good butterfly garden should include not only the popular nectar producing plants to attract adult butterflies, but also the host plants needed by their caterpillars for food and cover. These are often not the same plants.

Whatever your goal, use plants that are native to the region; they will require less care, be of greater benefit to native critters, and (with few exceptions) are less apt to run rampant over the landscape. Even your showy non-native specimens will benefit from the pest eating insect predators that quickly establish residence when given half a chance.

For many people, birds are the most desirable backyard wild fauna. There is no great trick to attracting birds to your yard: add native plants for shelter and food, and a source of fresh water, and they will come. A feeding station will concentrate numbers of birds where you can watch them easily; manage it by keeping it clean, and choose feeders that suit the foraging style of the species you wish to attract.

Chickadees are acrobatic clingers, woodpeckers like vertical surfaces, finches perch, and cardinals prefer a horizontal surface. Site your feeder(s) near some cover so the birds can take refuge when threatened.

The type of seed you offer can also alter the mix of visitors, and seed quality is of paramount importance. Make sure the seed you buy is fresh, and avoid mixes containing such cheap fillers as milo, wheat, canary grass, flax, or oats: these are not preferred by eastern birds and will wind up accumulating on the ground (where it can attract vermin).

There are any number of strategies that will deter unwanted visitors, and there are far too many possible situations than to address here. Just ask us! We know ways to keep Starlings off your suet and squirrels out of your sunflower seed.

Finally, have no fears that the birds will become dependant on you: this idea is a myth. Likewise, feeding does little to improve the survival of bird populations as a whole, though it may make a difference to individuals during periods of brutal winter weather. Build habitat to help conserve them, put up a feeder if you want to watch them. Doing both is the most rewarding hobby I know of.

**Did you know** that you can have your yard certified as wildlife habitat by the National Wildlife Federation? Or that Arlington has embarked on a program to have the whole county so certified? For information on this outstanding program, call NWF at 703-438-6001, or visit them at <http://www.nwf.org/backyardwildlifehabitat/> on the web (all lower case, no spaces).

## FEEDER HAWK

It's one of those crisp autumn mornings that bring out the best in a steaming cup of coffee. Settled snugly by the kitchen window, you watch as the activity builds around the feeders you just replenished. In a flash, your reverie is shattered as the flock explodes in all directions, and you catch a glimpse of a hard-edged shadow slicing through the corner of the yard. A hawk! Probably a Sharp-shinned or a Cooper's, or maybe even a Merlin! Did it get anything? It happened too fast to tell. What now? Whether successful or not, the hawk may be back, and you fear that your bird feeders will become bird dispensers. You remind yourself that Mother Nature can be a harsh taskmaster, "survival through tooth and claw" and all that. But are you guilty of aiding and abetting? Before you take any action, consider the roll of the predator.

The eyesight, the lightening-quick reflexes, the magic of flight, the very perfection that is a bird are owed in large part to predators. Usually, it is the slow, the sick, and the injured that are singled out. (Being a predator is a risky business, as even a minor injury can mean starvation to a hawk. The easier the prey, the better). By culling the unfit individuals, the prey's gene pool is enhanced and scarce resources can be shared throughout the healthy population. Contrary to the thinking of wildlife managers early in the last century, predators do not control prey populations in a healthy biome. The reality is quite the opposite: barring large-scale human interference, it is the availability of prey that determines the number of predators. Because they are specialized, raptors are more sensitive to the encroachment of mechanized man than those species that readily accept backyard buffets. It is good news indeed that some raptors are adapting to this new prey base, demonstrating that nature's plan still functions in suburbia.

So, what's the best thing to do? Provide some cover near your feeders so that the quick and healthy can exploit their edge, put some decals on the windows to keep panicked birds (and their pursuer) from flying into them, and cherish the hawks that continue to hone nature's most vibrant example of life.