

Plants Are for the Birds!

In a backyard garden, a fat caterpillar is munching on the leaf of a tall sunflower plant. Suddenly, a Golden-winged Warbler swoops down and grabs the caterpillar with its sharp beak. Holding the squirming caterpillar tightly, the bird flies to a nest hidden on the ground under dense bushes. There, the caterpillar becomes a meal for one of the hungry warbler chicks inside.

When you're hungry, you head to the kitchen. When birds are hungry, they often look for plants. In every kind of habitat—forests and fields, deserts and wetlands, backyards and city parks—plants provide an important source of food for birds, and other wildlife, too.

Plants of all kinds are very important to birds for other reasons, too. Tall trees, thick or thorny bushes, or delicate flowering plants: They all help birds survive and thrive in their habitats. Turn the page to find out more about why plants and birds need each other!



Golden-winged Warbler

BIRDS 
PLANTS

Humans like the way native **honeysuckle** smells. Hummingbirds find its nectar tasty, and finches and thrushes eat its berries.



Sunflowers and coneflowers have seeds in the fall that many kinds of birds love to eat. They also attract insects that birds love, too.





Caterpillar Math: A Tale of Two Trees

Scientists have discovered that more than 550 different kinds of butterflies and moths lay their eggs on native oak trees. (There are more than 100 different species of native oaks in North America.) Those eggs hatch into caterpillars that many kinds of birds feed to their young in the spring. On the other hand, only five kinds of butterflies and moths lay their eggs on ginkgo trees—a nonnative species that now grows in the United States. What do you think would happen to native birds if native oak trees were replaced by ginkgo trees?



Purple coneflower is a native plant that provides seeds for goldfinches and other birds.

The Native Connection

The plants and animals that have evolved together in a particular kind of habitat are called “native.” Over thousands and even millions of years they developed characteristics that are suited for certain conditions: how hot or cold it gets, how wet or dry it tends to be, what the soil is like, the other plants and animals that live there, and so on. Their lives affect each other in many different ways.

Native animals need native plants to survive and thrive in their natural habitats. Some animals eat plants. Other animals eat animals that eat plants. And some do both. In other words, directly or indirectly, plants feed all the animals on Earth. For birds, “plant food” can be the leaves, fruits,

seeds, and nectar that plants produce. Or it can be the insects and other creatures that plants attract, from aphids and ants to caterpillars, moths, and butterflies, to grasshoppers, lizards, spiders, snails, and even other birds. Native plants provide the food native birds need. That’s the native connection!

Plants are important for birds for other reasons, too. Most birds build their nests and raise their young in trees or bushes. Birds rest and roost in trees, hidden from predators and protected from bad weather. Owls and other birds of prey sit in trees, watching and listening for an animal scurrying over the ground below.

BIRDS 
PLANTS



Elderberry grows fruits that taste sweet to orioles, tanagers, and vireos. People think they’re sweet, too, and make the fruit into jams.



Oak trees are crawling with bugs that birds feed to their chicks, and many birds eat oak acorns. Birds also build their nests and find shelter in holes in large oak trees.



The sunflower is a native plant that attracts pollinators like native bees, as well as insects that birds eat.

A Closer Look at “Weeds” and “Pests”

How would you describe a weed? Is it thorny? Flowerless? Stinky? A “bad” plant? What does “pest” mean to you? Is it a creepy-crawly critter that bites or stings, or one that eats the leaves of your favorite plant?

Who Needs Weeds?

Here’s something that may surprise you: A weed is not a specific kind of plant. It’s actually a term someone gives to a plant they don’t like for some reason.

Here’s another surprise: What a human calls a weed may be just what a native bird needs. It could be a native plant that has fruit, seeds, or nectar that feed local birds, or it could attract yummy insects that those birds can feast on and feed to their young. On the other hand, a pretty nonnative plant could be no help at all to native birds and other wildlife.

What’s Best for Pests?

“Pest” is another word that gets used for an organism a person doesn’t like for one reason or another. But that “pest” could be part of the native ecosystem, providing an important link in a food chain.

When people use chemicals on plants to get rid of “pests,” they may be killing food supplies for birds and other wildlife, or making them sick. They may be harming native bees and other insects that help native plants reproduce. Those chemicals can eventually pollute local rivers or lakes. Maybe sharing our plants with local native creatures is a better idea. Some leaves may be eaten, but a healthy habitat will be able to continue to support the cycle of life.



Eastern Bluebird with grasshopper

Sharing the Love

You’ve been reading about how plants help birds. Did you know that birds also help plants?

Pollination. When a hummingbird drinks the nectar from a flower, some of the pollen from that flower clings to the bird’s feathers. When the hummingbird goes to another flower, the pollen can drop off. That’s called pollination. Plants need pollination to help them produce seeds to grow more plants.

Planting seeds. Some birds, like Blue Jays, collect and hide seeds in the ground to eat later. But sometimes the birds don’t return, the seeds sprout, and ... new plants grow!

Dropping seeds in droppings. Sometimes when a bird eats a fruit, the seeds inside the fruit don’t get digested. Instead, they come out in the bird’s droppings, which may fall on the ground far from the original plant the fruit came from. Those seeds sprout and...new plants grow!

Eating bugs. Birds help out plants by eating up lots and lots of caterpillars and other leaf-eating insects!



Beware! Invasive Plants!

Sometimes a plant that isn’t native makes its way into a habitat and causes a lot of problems. Plants like that are called “invasive.” One example is purple loosestrife, shown above. This pretty plant was brought to the northeastern United States from Europe and Asia in the 1800s. Now it’s a big problem in wetlands, roadsides, and other areas over most of the country. Since it didn’t evolve here, native creatures can’t or won’t eat it. That means it can grow and spread so thickly and so fast that it crowds out native plant species. Sometimes it forms such a dense barrier that it stops water from flowing in small streams. As it spreads it damages habitat that supports native birds, fish, and other wildlife. Fewer native plants means fewer caterpillars and other bugs, and that means less food for native wildlife.



Beautiful **buttonbushes** provide seeds for ducks and other waterfowl, while also attracting butterflies. These plants usually grow next to ponds and lakes.



Milkweed attracts many insects, especially caterpillars of the monarch butterfly. Birds use delicate fibers from puffy milkweed seedpods to make their nests soft. Goldfinches weave milkweed threads into their nests.



A Friend to Plants Is a Friend to Birds

You can help make your backyard, schoolyard, or local area into a place where birds can thrive.



Plant native plants. Ask an adult to help you find a list of native plants that are just right for your area. All you have to do is type in your zip code here:

audubon.org/native-plants.



Make a seed ball to plant native plants. Find a short how-to video here:

audubonadventures.org/Multimedia.htm.

Place the seed ball outside and watch plants grow!

Remove nonnative plants from your yard or schoolyard.

Maybe you can join a group that replaces nonnative plants with native ones in parks or vacant lots.



Native Plant/Native Bird Search!

Here's a fun way to take a closer look at plants, birds, and other critters that are right outside your door. Take this checklist with you whenever you go out. Keep looking all year long until you've spotted everything on the list! For an extra challenge, use field guides and other sources to try to identify every plant and critter you see.

Check it off when you find...

- ☐ **A plant with a flower.** What color is the flower? What shape is it?
- ☐ **A plant with no flowers.** Does it have flower buds? Do you think it will ever have flowers?
- ☐ **A seed or nut.** Which plant/tree do you think it came from?
- ☐ **A fruit or berry.** Which plant/tree do you think it came from?
- ☐ **A shrub or bush (not a tree) that's taller than you.** How tall is it? How much taller than you is it?
- ☐ **A seedling or sprout—a plant that's just starting to grow.** How tall is it?
- ☐ **A tree that has needles instead of leaves.**
- ☐ **The tallest tree in your yard/neighborhood/schoolyard.** How tall do you think it is?
- ☐ **A plant you think is a weed.** Why do you think so?
- ☐ **A bird.** Where is it? What does it look like? What is it doing?
- ☐ **Another bird.** How is it similar to and different from the first bird you spotted?
- ☐ **An insect or other "bug" on a plant.** What does it look like? What is it doing?
- ☐ **The most common kind of plant/tree in the area.** What does it look like?

Extra Challenge!

Use field guides and other sources to try to identify some of the plants and critters that live in your neighborhood!

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