



No. 20, May 28, 2020

Nature in “The Time of Coronavirus”

A lot has happened since our last issue in mid-March - most of it not good. But until recently, temperatures were relatively mild and stay-at-home orders kept us largely confined to our own properties. For many that has meant more time spent exploring our own backyard ecosystems - watching birds, appreciating wildflowers, and observing all of the wonderful things nature has to offer. Even before the pandemic, we were learning about how to enhance backyard habitats. The Wimberley Library series “Attracting Wildlife to Your Backyard” started in January with Leslie Uppinghouse from the Wildflower Center who spoke about the importance vegetation. Issue 18 of this newsletter (found [here](#)) summarized a lot of what she taught us. There were also talks in February and March, both on insects - one on bugs in general and the other on fireflies in particular. Both speakers emphasized the importance of such creatures as indicators of the health of our ecosystems.

Unfortunately, that marked the end of the in-person talks at the Wimberley Library. But we figured out how to continue the series using ZOOM. So, in April, wildlife biologist and Master Naturalist Leeann Linam talked about another harbinger of ecosystem health - amphibians. While we missed connecting in-person, the technology afforded a new opportunity, the ability to record Leeann’s talk. It is now available in a new section of our BeautifulHaysCounty.org website called [E-Nature for Kids of All Ages](#). This month, another Master Naturalist, Bonnie Tull, spoke about bird habitat. That talk was also recorded is now available on the same webpage. Here’s the [link](#) if you want to watch the talks or explore more nature videos and links.

Creating and Maintaining Bird Habitat

COVID-19 has heightened interest in bird-watching as people turn to nature for relief from stress and boredom. There have been spikes in downloads of popular bird apps, increases in bird feeders purchases and demand for birdseed has jumped. Social distancing is fairly easy even when birdwatching with a group of people. And it is something you can enjoy on your own without leaving your property. So this issue of the Riparian Network News is devoted to creating and maintaining bird habitat. Bonnie provided us with lots of insights and we’ve added a few more including thoughts specific to riparian habitats.

Riparian landowners are fortunate. The natural diversity of healthy riparian habitats translates to a greater variety of bird species. Many neotropical birds (i.e., birds who breed north and winter south of the Tropic of Cancer) migrate through Texas in the spring and fall. And riparian zones are highly favored as a stop-over points. So what is needed to create habitat attractive to birds, both year round residents and migrants? Answer - much the same as for other forms of wildlife - food, shelter, and water.

Starting with food, birds need more than occasional access to seeds left out by friendly humans. What birds need starts with vegetation. Most backyard birds eat some combination of

seeds, berries, and insects. In spring and early summer, many birds busily feed their young a high protein diet consisting mainly of insects - caterpillars, beetles, spiders and the like. But, even then, it is vegetation that attracts those insects. Birds such as owls and hawks who feed on rodents and the like, also rely on vegetation to sustain their prey.

So what kind of vegetation do you need? Answer - a wide variety of native plants to provide diverse food sources throughout the year for resident birds, in spring and fall for migrants passing through. The plants, insects, and birds of Central Texas evolved together. So focus on natives along with removal of non-natives to whatever extent is feasible. Research has proven the following simple equation - more native vegetation = more edible bugs = more desirable birds. For example, one native oak tree can support over 500 species of caterpillars. Its Asian alternatives support five or less. That's particularly important when you consider that one pair of chickadees require 6,000 to 9,000 caterpillars to raise just one clutch of offspring.

When thinking about planting for birds, you need to consider five basic groups - (1) larval insect host, (2) nectar-producing, (3) berry producing, (4) nut-producing, and (5) seed-producing. [Issue 15](#) of the Riparian Recovery Network News discussed larval insect hosts and nectar-producing plants for attracting butterflies to riparian areas. Caterpillars and other insects these plants attract provide an important food source for birds, particularly during the breeding season. Thus, what's good for the butterfly is also good for the bird. Some plants that provide both nectar and seeds you might want to encourage in more upland areas of your property include Frostweed, Zexmenia, and Plateau Goldeneye.



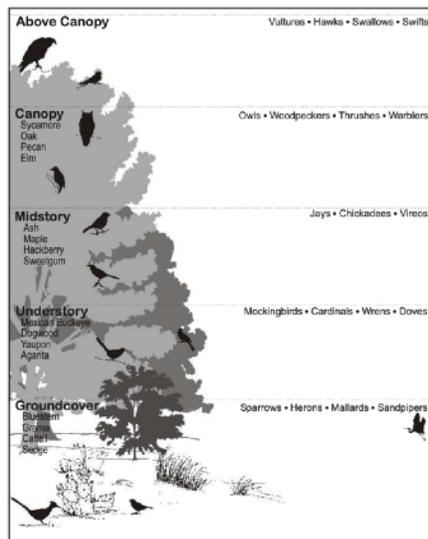
Particularly in winter when bugs are scarce, insect-eating birds often switch to berries. And in early spring, migrating birds like cedar waxwings and robins finish off the red berries on Possumhaw and Yaupon Holly. Mockingbirds will guard an American beautyberry and, in early spring, Baltimore Orioles can be seen finishing off any remaining berries. The white fruit of Roughleaf dogwood, another moist soil loving plant, is said to provide food for forty bird species. Wood ducks eat pecans and woodpeckers, jays, and titmice like acorns.

Native grasses are a good source for seed-loving birds especially when there is a mix of cool- and warm-season varieties to provide sustenance year round. Wild rye, both Canada and Virginia, are cool-season grasses that like moist soil. Bonnie mentioned Lindheimer muhly, Yellow indiagrass, and Eastern gamagrass - three warm weather grasses that favor the riparian zone. For upland areas, one you might want to reintroducing is Texas Cupgrass. Once abundant, years of overgrazing have made it scarce in the Wimberley Valley. The bonus - Painted Buntings love it!



Golf course-like landscapes consisting of manicured lawns with the occasional tall shade tree are unattractive to most birds. That is, except the ones most of us don't like - think noisy grackles. Rather, you might want to recreate what is sometimes called "edge habitat" referring to a bird rich area that sits at the interface between a meadow and a forest. Numerous studies have shown most native birds prefer such multilayered landscapes as they provide protection

TEXAS PARKS AND WILDLIFE
Texas Birds and the Vegetative Layers They Live In



from both predators and the elements. Also, different birds tend to live at varying levels as shown in the graphic at the right.

So consider what might be lacking in your landscape and figure out what you can plant to compensate. Very often the missing element is understory which primarily consists of shrubs and small trees. Bonnie suggested two shrubs that tolerate moist soils - Lindheimer silktassel and Black Haw Viburnum. For more ideas on what you might plant in the riparian part of your property and elsewhere, here's a [list](#) of bird habitat suggestions prepared by Travis Audubon.

Another consideration is preserving natural nesting sites. So you might want to leave some of those unsightly trees you are tempted to cut down. Referred to as "snags," standing, dead or dying trees attract lots of birds including woodpeckers, screech owls, chickadees, and titmice. Some experts recommend keeping at least one dead tree per acre if you are seeking to create bird habitat. You might

also think about constructing brush piles to provide protected spots, especially in places where understory is currently lacking.

Birds naturally gravitate to riparian areas and another reason is the natural presence of the third essential ingredient for attracting birds - water. But remember birds need to be able to get to the water. So overhanging branches, dead sticks/rocks in the water, and other possible perching locations should be left intact rather than cleared away. Also small natural depressions where water tends to accumulate should not be filled in. Worried about mosquitos? It is OK to add a small piece of mosquito dunk every once in a while. If you want to encourage birds in your upland areas, perhaps closer to your house, you might consider building a small pond. Bonnie showed us lots of examples of great designs, many relatively simple to construct.

Bonnie also talked about building nesting boxes including a unique bluebird house she designed made of PVC fencing. Birdhouse designs vary depending on the kind of bird you are trying to attract. For those who want to help our feathered friends find a place to live, Bonnie provided this [link](#) to various species-specific designs. She also talked about bird feeders and, in both cases, emphasized the need for incorporating protection from predators using baffles and hardware cloth. Another way she suggested helping nesting birds is by providing natural materials - string, wool, hair from your hairbrush or that of your dog or cat, etc. And please keep your cat inside. Cats are considered the number one human-caused threat to native birds.



Bonnie left us with one more thought we would like to pass on to the bird lovers among us:

“If you build it, they will come!”

The Riparian Recovery Network News is a periodic Hays County Master Naturalist publication covering topics of interest to the Wimberley Valley community. Back issues are available at <http://beautifulhayscounty.org/conservation-restoration/>. Share with neighbors and friends. Send questions or ideas for new topics to riparian@haysmn.org. Also use this same address to get on our mailing list.

