

Wildlife Habitat in a Small Backyard?

A few weeks ago I wrote about the wildlife habitat in our backyard and how we have many more critters in our backyard than in the surrounding pasture. We have about one acre which is high fenced, which is enough space to create enough diversity of vegetation, bird feeders and a water source to attract lots of birds and butterflies as well as many other critters.

So the question is, what if you have only a small fraction of that space? Can you have wildlife habitat in a city lot? And the answer is, most certainly, yes. The usual definition of wildlife habitat is that it is the area which provides all the food, water, shelter and space to raise young that an animal needs. What that really says is that all of these must be present within the range of a given species to be suitable habitat for that species.

But it doesn't mean that if the animal can't find everything it needs to live in your yard, that it will never go into your yard. If you think in terms of a bird, if you have a nest box that is the size a titmouse likes, it may nest in your yard even if you don't have any water for it—it can fly to a neighbor or across the street to find water. But the more things that the bird needs to live that can be found in your yard, then the more time it will spend in your yard and the more often you can see it. Ditto for other species that need other things, such as other birds, butterflies or squirrels. And some things, like lizards, frogs, praying mantis' etc. don't need much space at all.

So the point is, if you provide as diverse a native vegetation as you can, eliminate as much non-native vegetation as possible, provide some bird feeders and perhaps a constant source of water, and don't have any outside cats, a lot of birds may spend a lot of time in your yard, even if you don't have everything every species wants. That also works for things like butterflies if you have a collection of native flowers blooming throughout the year.

So what can you do to better attract wildlife? If you have a Bermuda grass or St. Augustine lawn, know that it is not good habitat for much of anything. So I would suggest you convert some of that lawn into space to grow some native shrubs and perennials. If you have deer problems, I would suggest you try agarita, autumn sage, copper canyon daisy, damianita, flame acanthus, skeleton-leaf goldeneye, Texas (native) lantana, Texas mountain laurel, and Texas persimmon.

If you don't have deer problems, you might also consider Blanco crabapple, Coral honeysuckle, Mexican buckeye, Mexican plum, possumhaw, rose pavonia, and Texas redbud.

For forbs that are unlikely to be eaten by deer, you can try cowpen daisy, Mexican hat, mealy blue sage, prairie verbena, silver-leaf nightshade, and zexmenia. If deer are not

a problem, then you can add any of the sunflowers (bush, common, maximilian) as well as Engelmann daisy.

Specifically, for butterflies, try blue mist flower and any or all of the various native milkweeds. For seeds for all of the latter as well as all of the other forbs listed here, go to www.seedsource.com.

For bird feeders, I would suggest at least two different sunflower seed types, none of which are accessible to larger birds like grackles, plus thistle feeders for finches and hummingbird feeders. Make sure all of the feeders are not so close to the ground that cats can jump up to catch birds, and keep your cats inside.

For water, anything that makes noise by flowing or dripping water helps to attract birds. Birds would prefer water at ground level (like their natural sources) in an open area where they can spot predators, and they don't need it to be large and certainly it should not be over about 1-inch or so deep.

Finally, I would eliminate all non-native plants such as chinaberry trees, ligustrum, bamboo, Arundo donax, and other non-native shrubs as they don't really attract wildlife and they crowd out natives. I would also minimize, if not eliminate, the use of insecticides as all birds need insects for food at some stage of their lives.

Any area that contains a good number of all of the above will certainly attract birds and butterflies and occasionally other wildlife as well.

For more information on attracting birds, I recommend, "Attracting Birds in the Texas Hill Country: A Guide to Land Stewardship", by Rufus Stephens and Jan Wrede.

If you grow it, they will come.

Until next time...

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