

Feed the Birds!

by Wendy Rihner

Standing under a late-July Wisconsin sun, scanning the wide-open vista of a carefully restored prairie, I hear Kenn Kaufman suddenly report, “There, on the Canada Goldenrod! American Goldfinches in bright yellow summer plumage!” For the birders on a post-National Audubon Society convention field trip, hiking with Kaufman - the renowned ornithologist, author and all-around great guy - was already a highlight. For that one morning, watching Dicksissels and Henslow’s Sparrows flit and duck in native grasses like Switchgrass and Indian Grass transported me back to the era of pre-European settlement when these birds had free reign in this prairie ecosystem. And the wildlife gardeners on the field trip, standing quietly in waist high Bluestem, watching butterflies bounce from purple Prairie Sweet Clover to Compass Plant to Hoary Vervain, well, they too, had reached their Nirvana.

Isn’t that what wildlife gardening is all about, the great joy that comes from watching nature live freely as it has for eons? For me, I can think of no greater accomplishment than to know that my efforts at “restoring habitat” in my backyard offer food and a safe haven for birds, butterflies, and countless species of bees and other pollinators.

My neighbor was puzzled last spring as to why I emerged from the backyard with binoculars around my neck. I simply pointed to her beautifully expansive Live Oak that we “share.” Now, fall migration is upon us in Southeastern Louisiana, and the greatest native plant in all in my estimation, the Live Oak, is hard at work feeding the abundant Yellow Warblers that are migrating through on their way to their wintering grounds in Mexico and Central America. All of our native trees, especially the oaks, willows and wild cherries, host a good number of caterpillars, spiders and insect larvae that these migrating warblers need to replenish the fat reserves under their breasts and under their wings. Imagine flying across the Gulf of Mexico and not having enough protein!



Many warblers like this one migrate through Louisiana in the Spring and Fall



Arrowwood Viburnum provides protection and food for birds

Live Oaks may not be in everyone’s personal garden scheme or budget, but there are lots of other native tree and shrub choices that can provide much needed bird food during this critical time of year. Parsley Hawthorn, with its bright red fall berries, makes a nice, understory tree in any yard and Arrowwood Viburnum is just the type of thick shrub that provides great cover and protection for birds as well as nutritious dark purple fruits late in the year. Many bird species aside from warblers are migrating through our area in October and desperately need our help. Bird habitat is disappearing at a rapid pace, and in suburban areas like Metairie, where I live, concrete, grass lawns and exotic trees do not provide food or respite for wildlife.

Feed the Birds with these Native Plants

Fruit & Berries

Elderberry, *Sambucus canadensis*
Cherry Laurel, *Prunus caroliniana*
American Beautyberry, *Callicarpa americana*
Arrowwood Viburnum, *Viburnum dentatum*
Wax Myrtle, *Myrica cerifera*
Yaupon Holly, *Ilex vomitoria*
Huckleberry/Blueberry, *Vaccinium sp.*
American Wahoo, *Euonymus purpureus*
Parsley Hawthorne, *Crataegus marshallii*
Rough-leaf Dogwood, *Cornus drummondii*
Pokeweed, *Phytolacca americana*

Seedheads

Grama Grass, *Bouteloua*
River Oats, *Chasmanthium latifolium*
Bluestem Grasses, *Schizachyrium/Andropogon sp*
Switchgrasses, *Panicum*
Native Sunflowers, *Helianthus sp.*
Purple Coneflower, *Echinacea purpurea*
Tickseeds, *Coreopsis sp.*
Black Eyed Susan, *Rudbeckia sp.*

Insect Hosts

Native Oak Trees: Shumard, Nuttall, Cherrybark, Live Oak, etc.
Black Cherry, *Prunus serotina*
Goldenrods, *Solidago sp.*
Native Hibiscus, *Hibiscus sp.*

Nectar Plants

Coral Honeysuckle, *Lonicera sempervirens*
Crossvine, *Bignonia capreolata*
Cardinal Flower, *Lobelia cardinalis*
Scarlet Sage, *Salvia coccinea*

Nectar-feeding Ruby-throated Hummingbirds arrive in mid-to-late August and any native that sports a tubular bloom from red to purple will bring these flight masters into your yard. Certainly, Cardinal Flower and its blue relative, Great Blue Lobelia have the color and the nectar source to appeal to hummingbirds. *Salvia coccinea* also attracts hummers, along with bees. Though its height might make it an unlikely attractant, a fantastic plant is Gulf Coast Penstemon. I watched one early April morning a Ruby-throated Hummingbird flit to the pretty violet blooms, dodging bees all the while. Finally, if space is no issue, then go for Red Buckeye, a hummingbird magnet, or any of the native vines like Crossvine, Trumpet Creeper or Coral Honeysuckle.



Ruby-throated hummingbird nectaring at Coral Honeysuckle M. Glaspell

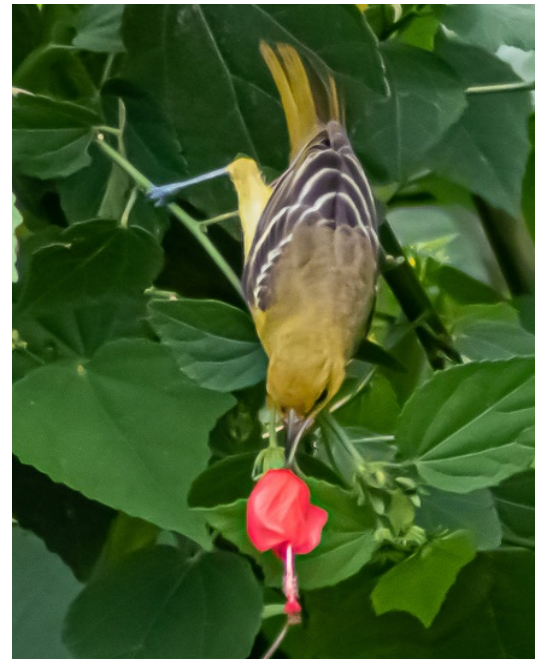
In the last few decades, ornithologists have marveled at how Southern Louisiana hosts wintering western species of hummingbirds. Last year, I had two Black-chinned Hummingbirds in the yard! Rufous, Calliope (and that is pronounced as it is intended to be), and Buff-bellied are a few other species that have been reported regularly to the LA hummingbird network, HUMNET. I supplement the nectar sources in my garden with tropicals in addition to hanging feeders to satisfy the wintering hummers, for few of my natives bloom into mid-December and January.



This dried seedhead of a purple coneflower has already been fed on by birds

Seed and fruit-eating birds are also making their way down south, and like the wintering western hummingbirds, many species stay the winter until instinct once again calls them back up north. One of the most difficult bird groups to identify easily, the sparrows, have several representatives arriving here in late fall and staying through winter. Song and White-throated Sparrows love tangles of blackberry and native grasses like Bluestem, Gama Grass, and perhaps the best seed-producing grass for birds, Switchgrass. As native plant advocates and habitat gardeners, we don't trim off our dead blooms to neaten our gardens but leave them on the plant, and the American Goldfinch, the House and Purple Finches benefit! Nothing attracts seed eaters like finches than the dried seedheads of coneflowers, goldenrods, or sunflowers. Birds' bones are hollow, so it is no miracle that they can alight on a stalk without too much give on the part of the stalk!

Lastly, evolution programmed many species to alternate diets during migration when fruit sources are no longer available, so many species like Tanagers, Robins, and Red-winged Blackbirds will eat insects also. Indeed, even hummingbirds will eat spiders, aphids and other insects for the protein and almost all birds feed insects, primarily caterpillars, to their young during nesting season. So, certainly birdseed feeders can supplement a bird's diet, but the birds clearly need the plants they have co-evolved with over eons and the insect life those native plants support.



An Orchard Oriole drinks nectar from Turk's Cap



More than half of this Brown Thrasher's diet is insects

While marveling at the work Madison Audubon has done to turn old farmlands into native Wisconsin prairies, a few of us conventioners chuckled at how true that cinematic cliché really is: *"If you build it, they will come."* We can all restore habitat in our backyards, no matter how small. The birds depend on it.

Wendy Rihner is an English Professor at Delgado Community College and has been an avid birder for over 20 years. A member of the Native Plant Initiative of Greater New Orleans and Orleans Audubon, Rihner is an enthusiastic wildlife and habitat gardener in her yard in Metairie, Louisiana. For more information about gardening with Louisiana Native Plants, visit NPI-GNO.org.