

Avian Adventures - for the Birds  
Cindy Gilberg



Outside my window is a constantly moving and colorful avian dance. Hummingbirds are tenaciously defending their nectar sources and will do so until their departure in October. Goldfinches hang onto coneflowers as they extract the seeds they love so much. Bluebirds and Phoebes swoop down to capture various insects. As the days get shorter signaling the last hoorah of summer, a multitude of birds begin their long migrations southward. Our region is on a major flyway for many of these travelers who visit us for brief periods in the fall and again in the spring. Numerous other bird species are either year-round residents or come to stay for the winter months.

Recognizing basic needs such as food, water and shelter and providing those needs year-round is important. Diversity of plants in your garden is the key to ensuring that a diversity of our feathered friends will visit. Water gardens with small, shallow rivulets or waterfalls provide water and additional habitat for birds while also an exciting garden feature for the gardener. A very small percentage of birds actually visit birdfeeders and most prefer natural habitat that favors their needs.

The smorgasbord should include plants that provide seeds or berries and a habitat conducive to insects, a favorite food of many birds in the summer. Deadheading flowers is a common practice for many gardeners but prevents nutritious seeds from ripening. Avoid using insecticides (harmful to birds too!) and allow the birds to be part of your biological control program. After the first frost don't be so quick to clean up the garden. Pruning perennials to the ground not only removes both seed and cover for many birds, it can also cause crown damage or winter kill in many perennials.

One of the most popular birds is the ruby-throated hummingbird. They arrive in April when the wild columbine (*Aquilegia*) and bluebells (*Mertensia*) are blooming in our woodlands. These quick-flying, diminutive gems that frequent our gardens are especially attracted to tubular-shaped red, orange and pink flowers that provide nectar. They dart about for nectar, returning again to the shelter of large shrubs and trees, so include some in your garden design. Provide favorite nectar sources such as blazing star (*Liatris*), beebalm (*Monarda*), *Phlox* and catchfly/pinks (*Silene*). Larger plants, for

example, red buckeye (*Aesculus pavia*) and trumpet creeper (*Campsis*), are among other desirable nectar sources.

Prairie and savannah plants appeal to a wide array of birds such as wrens, sparrows, cardinals, finches and my favorite – the indigo bunting. Blazing star (*Liatris*) is at the top of the list again, inviting numerous butterflies when in bloom and then birds that nibble at the seeds. Plant an assortment of flowers from the aster family, the most familiar being *Aster*, coneflowers (*Echinacea*), black-eyed Susans (*Rudbeckia*), goldenrods (*Solidago*) and sunflowers (*Heliopsis/Helianthus*). Grasses add unique form and texture to the garden as well as an abundance of seed. Little bluestem (*Schizachyrium*), prairie dropseed (*Sporobolus*) and side oats grama (*Bouteloua*) are wonderful additions to garden designs.

As autumn turns to winter insect populations decline and many birds shift their diet to fruits, most commonly provided by shrubs and trees. Migrating birds such as orioles and tanagers search for high-fat fruits offered in fall by dogwoods (*Cornus*) and spicebush (*Lindera*). I love watching the large flocks of cedar waxwings visit our cedar trees (*Juniperus*) to eat the frosty blue berries. Hawthorn (*Crataegus*), blackgum (*Nyssa*) are other welcome additions in any garden setting. To complete the garden design add some shrubs, most notably winterberry (*Ilex*), *Viburnum* and *Sumac*. All of these have attractive fruit that create winter interest in the garden.



Look over the plants lists for attracting birds and notice that many plants attract more than one group of birds in different seasons. Incorporate any or all of these plants into a conventional sunny garden design or looser more natural design – either way you will notice an increase of avian visitors.

Photos by Danny Brown