

# Landscaping for Migratory Birds



## Southeast Michigan: A critical stopover site for migrant birds

Southeast Michigan, especially areas near Lake Erie, the Detroit River, and Lake St. Clair, is one of the most important areas in North America for migrating birds. Billions of birds of many dozens of species, including nearly 40 species of warblers and over 20 sparrow species, migrate through this region each spring and fall.

Yet the landscape of southeast Michigan has changed dramatically since European settlement. These changes have reduced the number of quality sites left for migrating songbirds to stop, rest, and refuel. Loss of migratory stopover site habitat has contributed to declines in many species of birds. You can help these migrants by providing food and sanctuary on your property!

### Points to remember when landscaping for birds

A key goal in landscaping for migratory birds is to mimic natural, native habitats as closely as possible.

- **Use native plants.** The birds and plants in this region co-evolved. This relationship includes precisely choreographed timing of bird migration with leaf emergence, flowering, and fruiting; insect dependence on plants and birds that specialize on feeding on them; and food webs that span entire ecosystems. Use of non-native plants, even if they provide food or shelter for birds, disrupt this interconnectedness in both dramatic and subtle ways.
- **Add habitat structure.** Natural habitats consist of multiple layers of vegetation. In forested habitats, this includes leaf litter and herbaceous plants at ground level, shrubs and vines in the understory, and trees of various heights in the canopy. Old fields and even

meadows also display this layering, just on a smaller scale.

The more complex this vegetative “structure,” the more valuable it is to birds. It provides them with shelter and protection and plenty of variable surfaces on which to forage.

- **Reduce chemicals.** Some lawn chemicals harm birds and wildlife directly, while others may have sub-lethal effects (impeding successful reproduction, for example). But the most direct effect pesticides have on birds is the reduction of their food supply. The purpose of pesticides is to kill insects. Birds rely on these insects for food. Get rid of pesticides and welcome back natural pest control: birds!
- **Minimize lawn.** A lawn provides little in the way of habitat for birds or insects,

and generally requires lots of water, chemicals, and maintenance. Replacing grass with native wildflowers and shrubs helps restore native food webs, reduces time and energy spent mowing, conserves water, and reduces run-off from fertilizers and chemicals that end up in our waterways.

- **Additional features.** A source of water, brush piles, standing dead trees, and native evergreens (especially Eastern Red Cedar, *Juniperus virginiana*) are all valuable additions to your landscape.



## Native plants that are especially important in spring

Spring migrants feed heavily on insects. In fact, their northbound journey often coincides with the leaf-out or bloom of trees and the simultaneous emergence of insects which rely on tender new leaves and blossoms. This special relationship co-evolved over millennia, which is why it is so important to plant native species – to preserve and foster this interconnectedness. Here are some species that are important to insects and hence to the birds that depend on them.

- **Oaks** (*Quercus* sp., especially White Oak, *Q. alba*, and Northern

Red Oak, *Q. borealis*). Many species of migratory songbirds favor feeding on oaks in spring. Acorns are also important fall and winter food for some birds and animals.

- **Willows** (*Salix* sp.)
- **Hackberry** (*Celtis occidentalis*). Fruit also important in fall.
- **Serviceberry** (*Amelanchier arborea* and *A. laevis*). Flowers and summer fruits also beneficial.
- **Native wildflowers**. Native pollinators and hummingbirds, and

seed-eating birds in fall, will appreciate a variety of flowering plants such as Wild Columbine (*Aquilegia canadensis*), cone-flowers (*Echinacea*), Rudbeckias, asters, milkweeds, and goldenrods. Be sure that the variety you plant is native to Michigan.



## Native plants that are especially important in fall

Fruit is a big part of the diet of migrating birds in fall, even for species that usually eat primarily insects. Trees

and shrubs with fruit that is about one-third of an inch across (about 8 mm) is ideally sized for songbirds! If possible, plant fruiting shrubs in groups to maximize cross-pollination and fruit display.

- **Dogwoods**, especially Gray Dogwood (*Cornus racemosa*) and

**Red-osier Dogwood** (*C. stolonifera*). Dogwood fruits have some of the highest fat contents of any native fruits, which helps birds gain weight to fuel their migration.

- **Virginia Creeper** (*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*). Also very high in fat.
- **Spicebush** (*Lindera benzoin*).
- **Wild grapes** (*Vitis* sp.) High in sugars, for quick energy.
- **Arrowwood** (*Viburnum recognitum* or *V. dentatum*).
- **Poison Ivy** (*Toxicodendron radicans*). Although most people are

not likely to plant this toxic vine, if you have a wild area where you can let it grow, do so. The white berries are eagerly sought after by birds, and are very nutritious!

### Avoid these non-native plants!

While some non-native species do provide food for birds, they may not be as nutritious and, most importantly, they may profoundly alter plant communities, soil chemistry and hydrology, and food webs. Because they do not have native invertebrate predators, they rarely provide insect food to birds, and without bugs to keep them in check, these plants may spread aggressively. Here are some of the worst offenders.

- Buckthorns (*Rhamnus* sp.)
- Bush honeysuckles (*Lonicera maackii*, *L. morrowii*, and *L. tatarica*) and the vining *L. japonica*.
- Autumn Olive and Russian Olive (*Elaeagnus umbellata* and *E. angustifolia*).
- Privet (*Ligustricum* sp.).

## Recommended Resources

### Books

- *Bringing Nature Home: How Native Plants Sustain Wildlife in Our Gardens* by Douglas Tallamy <http://tinyurl.com/yohbbf>
- *Birdscaping in the Midwest* by Mariette Nowak <http://tinyurl.com/2aly76>
- *The Audubon Society Guide to Attracting Birds: Creating Natural Habitats for Properties Large and Small* by Stephen Kress <http://tinyurl.com/yrplzj>

### Web sites

- Audubon at Home – [www.audubon.org/bird/at\\_home/](http://www.audubon.org/bird/at_home/)
- Wild Ones, native landscaping organization – <http://www.for-wild.org/>

### Plant material

- Wildtype Design, Native Plants and Seeds, Mason, MI. 517-244-1140. [www.wildtypeplants.com](http://www.wildtypeplants.com)
- Native Plant Nursery, Ann Arbor, MI. 734-677-3260. [www.nativeplant.com](http://www.nativeplant.com)

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