

Gardening for Wildlife

by Rachel Oppedahl

One morning recently, as I sipped coffee on the deck, several of my favorite critters came calling. An Anna's Hummingbird drank from a nearby feeder and a red-flowering salvia and then, incredibly, flew to within ten inches of my face and hovered there, looking at me, as if to thank me for my kindness (or so I imagine). One of the beautiful, noisy, neighborhood Stellar's Jays splashed and cooled herself in the simple bowl of water and pebbles I placed on the deck railing. And a butterfly danced all over my newly planted butterfly bush.



I have been thrilled — and at times, restored — by simple visitations like these. And so, I find myself drawn more and more to the idea of focusing my ever-evolving garden plans as much on creating a wildlife habitat as on designing an aesthetically pleasing landscape. The two goals aren't mutually exclusive, of course, but to root a garden design in drawing and caring for the wild things first is a different exercise than deciding where to put the peonies.



My inspiration these days is the simple design model offered by the National Wildlife Federation (NWF) for creating a Certified Wildlife Habitat in your own backyard. To plan such a garden, the NWF recommends you focus on providing four things: food (ideally from native plants), water, cover and places for wildlife to raise their young.

Food. Grow as many native plants as possible to provide the seeds, berries, nectar, foliage, nuts, fruit, sap and pollen that help local wildlife thrive. Want the thrill of hummingbirds from spring to fall without having to endlessly restock that sugar-water feeder? Plant these beautiful flowering natives to attract hummers: California fuchsia, penstemon and columbine (among many others). If you would like to draw all manner of birds, try plants that produce the seeds and berries they love: lupine, California poppy (I've read that quail relish them), yarrow, Western serviceberry, and wild strawberries. And to help save the honeybees, consider one of their favorites, the California lilac (Ceanothus)—beautiful, native evergreen bushes with various colors of purple flowers in spring (depending on the variety).



Water. If your property doesn't have a natural creek or pond, birdbaths and well-designed water features will go a long way in helping wildlife get through our hot, dry summers. And here's an interesting National Wildlife Federation suggestion: create puddles. "Butterflies, males in particular, can often be seen engaging in a behavior called 'puddling'," says naturalist David Mizejewski in the NWF book, "Attracting Birds, Butterflies and Other Backyard Wildlife." He explains that "When they find a wet, muddy patch of soil ... they gather up the liquid, which is rich in minerals."

Cover. Wildlife needs places to find shelter from inclement weather and from predators. Dense bushes and trees are good, such as the California Flannel Bush, holly

and mallows, as are our native conifers and oaks. Additional cover for birds and other small animals includes a rock pile, a bramble patch, or a hollow log.

Raising Young. Many of the same trees, bushes, plants and landscape features that provide food and cover for birds, mammals and reptiles also serve them in rearing young. You can add to your native plantings by adding nesting boxes designed to suit wildlife, ponds for frogs, and host plants that feed the caterpillar stage of butterflies. Milkweed, for example, is the only food the caterpillar stage of Monarch butterflies will eat.



For extensive lists of native plants that draw local wildlife, contact the Tuolumne County Master Gardeners and the California Native Plant Society at <http://www.sierrafoothillscnps.org/gardening.html#handouts>. Detailed guidelines and checklists for creating your own Certified Wildlife Habitat at home can be found on the National Wildlife Federation website, <http://www.nwf.org/>

Rachel Oppedahl is a UCCE Tuolumne County Master Gardener.