



Birds

Backyard birds

You can attract birds to your yard by offering them food, nesting habitat and water. The species of birds that come to your yard will depend on the habitat. Some birds need open areas and others need forests. Some species, such as chickadees and titmice, are generalists and are able to thrive in a wide variety of habitats.

Bird feeders

Birdseed, suet and sugar solutions are the most common foods used to attract birds. Birds with a large bill, such as towhees and cardinals generally prefer large seeds like black oil sunflower seed. Small-billed seedeaters, such as buntings and chipping sparrows, prefer millet and other small seeds. Goldfinches have a special fondness for thistle seed.

Birds with slender bills typically eat insects, but they will also eat berries when available. During winter, some of these species will eat suet cakes or homemade recipes of suet and peanut butter. Species attracted to suet cakes include woodpeckers, warblers, chickadees, nuthatches, wrens, and occasionally bluebirds.

To attract hummingbirds hang a couple of red hummingbird feeders filled with a solution of 4 parts water to 1 part sugar in mid-March. Do not add red dye to the water; the red feeder will attract the birds. Placing feeders on different sides of your house will increase the number of visits because hummingbirds are very territorial. Feeders should be emptied and refilled once a week during warmer months. Even if you don't see hummingbirds in the early summer you may attract them as they start their southern migration in July. Keep your feeders out as long as hummingbirds are present.

Attract orchard orioles by putting out orange slices or by having a hummingbird feeder that allows the oriole to perch while feeding.

Birdhouses

Birdhouses attract bird species that typically nest in natural cavities that are often created by woodpeckers. Bluebirds require open areas with large areas of short grass — they avoid wooded areas. Species that use a nesting box include chickadees, titmice, nuthatches and Carolina wrens. A box with a slightly larger opening might attract a great crested flycatcher. European starlings also use boxes with larger holes. A funnel-shaped predator guard mounted on the box pole will reduce the risk posed by rat snakes and raccoons. Spring Island residents monitor bluebird boxes throughout the Island.

Purple martins will also use birdhouses, but only if the martin house is located in a wide-open area. On Spring Island purple martins are most often found at the end of a dock or in a large, open field.

Dead trees or snags also provide habitat for birds that nest in cavities.

Water features

Birds are attracted to water throughout the year. A water feature can be as simple as a dish under a faucet or as sophisticated as a recirculating, running stream of water cascading into a series of shallow pools. Drippers placed on a traditional birdbath will attract migrating birds. Birdbaths require regular maintenance because they quickly become overgrown with algae. Clean your birdbath with a weak bleach solution to kill algae and disease-causing bacteria.

If you are designing a water feature to be used by birds, make sure it has shallow areas (less than an

inch deep) where small birds can stand in the water and bathe. A water feature with a gently sloping edge will provide varying depths for all sizes of birds. Water features with deep areas will attract small alligators.

Providing suitable habitat

Songbirds are abundant on Spring Island throughout the year because of the diversity of habitats, abundance of insects and numerous fruit-bearing plants. Caterpillars are an important food source during the breeding season. Weedy areas with host plants for butterflies and moths create excellent summer and fall feeding areas that also support grasshoppers and other insects that overwinter on Spring Island.

If you plant the right species of shrubs and trees in your yard a wide variety of songbirds will be attracted year-round. The key is to provide berries in all seasons. In late summer fruits high in sugar are common. Some of the most popular native species are black cherry, devil's walking stick and elderberry. In early fall the fruits of Virginia creeper, dogwood, beautyberry, blackgum and Jack-in-the-pulpit ripen and attract migrating warblers, thrushes and vireos. Some winter fruits, such as wax myrtle and sugarberry, have a long "shelf life" because they are high in wax. They are a critical food source during cold spells. Other fruits, such as the holly berries, remain on the plant for an extended period before birds such as cedar waxwings and wintering robins find them edible.

It is critical for songbirds to have the right habitat. Evergreen shrubs near a bird feeder or birdbath provide cover from Cooper's and sharp-shinned hawk attacks. A healthy, wide nature curtain also attracts birds during the nesting season. Towhees, white-eyed vireos and barred owls nest within these forested strips between adjacent homes.

Painted buntings are a favorite species on Spring Island. Thickets for nesting, patches of native grasses in seed and herbaceous plants provide important habitat for painted buntings, especially when they have young. They love feeders filled with white millet seeds. Buntings have virtually disappeared from other residential communities that are highly manicured.

Cormorants

During the past three decades our nation's population of double-crested cormorants has grown exponentially. This fish-eating bird, a distant relative of pelicans, nests in large colonies in the Northeast and Great Lakes regions and winters along the southeastern coast from October-March. They have strong flocking behavior and will congregate in locations where the fishing is good. This causes conflict with those who maintain ponds stocked with fish.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service now provides permits to shoot cormorants when they create an economic hardship. These permits are very restrictive. They allow shooting a few birds to deter larger flocks from becoming habituated in stocked ponds. The POA maintains a permit for taking out cormorants at ponds that are stocked for trophy bass fishing.

Rookeries and roosts

Rookeries are relatively small areas in which large numbers of water birds congregate to nest. They are typically located in a place where it is difficult for predators to reach, such as an island or a group of trees located over water. A healthy heron-egret rookery in the lowcountry usually has a healthy alligator population present, which deters other predators.

During the severe drought of 1998-2003 herons and egrets abandoned rookeries in the region's cypress swamps. In 1999 a few egrets began nesting in wax myrtle bushes overhanging the water at Night Heron Pond. The size of this colony quickly grew. In 2002 the birds moved to the island on the 16th fairway, which was created during the golf course's construction to provide a rookery habitat. In 2012 wood storks, a federally protected species, moved into this rookery and by 2014 there were more than 55 wood stork nests.

Nesting birds create a heavy nutrient load that can cause algae blooms in ponds. Decaying algae can cause an obnoxious odor and a fish kill when the algae consumes the pond's oxygen. To solve this problem at the 16th fairway pond, the POA installed an aeration system that uses submerged pumps to circulate the water. This has become a model for other communities with rookeries.

Another problem with rookeries is the high concentration of guano that kills the trees in which the birds are nesting. Adding several tons of lime per acre helps to neutralize the acidity of the accumulated bird droppings, but this must be applied during the non-nesting season. Inevitably some trees die and are subsequently replaced by species that are more tolerant of low pH conditions.

Roosts are areas where large numbers of birds congregate for the night or, in the case of some birds, when high tides prevent them from feeding. In the case of egrets, herons, ibis and storks, a rookery may become a roost after the breeding season is over.

Turkey vultures and black vultures also establish nighttime roosts. This can become a problem when they select a resident's rooftop and their voluminous amounts of foul-smelling excrement pile up. The best solution to this problem is to scare birds off with loud noises as soon as they select a house as a roost. Security has noise devices to assist with this problem.