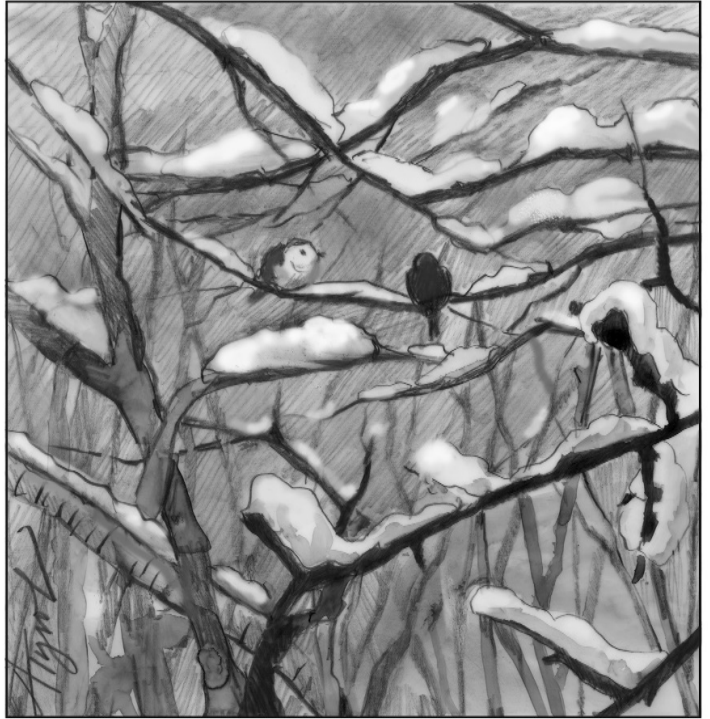


The Outside Story

How to Provide Shelter for Birds

By Lee Emmons

Come winter, after the bears have retreated to their cold weather dens, many backyard bird enthusiasts hang feeders to attract – and nourish – avian visitors. Birds need more than a supplemental food source, however. Whether they are roosting, feeding, selecting a nest location, or flying from one grove of trees to another, birds rely on vegetative cover, from the ground level to the treetops. Offering natural sources of cover can help birds evade predators and find protection from inclement weather, as well as provide shelter during migration.



While specific requirements vary by species, all birds are dependent on the trees and shrubs native to the area in which they live. Non-native plants, which monopolize many gardens and yards, may also provide some level of protection. Birds find safety among various different plant layers, and an array of vegetation types will likely attract a diversity of bird species.

“One of the best ways to help birds is to have cover at each level,” said Matt Tarr, a wildlife specialist with the University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension.

During the spring and summer breeding and young-rearing season, gray catbirds and northern cardinals forage and nest at the shrub level. In contrast, taller trees shelter Baltimore orioles and rose-breasted grosbeaks. Other species, such as woodpeckers, titmice, and chickadees, find cover in standing dead trees. Short grassy areas will provide places for northern flickers and mourning doves to forage. When left intact over the winter, these same grassy areas can also provide cover and food for pine siskins, common redpolls, and American goldfinches.

The cover needs of birds also vary by time of day, especially during winter. Birds require places to efficiently forage during daylight hours, said Tarr. After snatching a seed from a feeder, a black-capped chickadee needs a place to safely eat it. Placing feeders close to sources of cover – such as bushy shrubs – helps birds conserve finite energy reserves. At night, after foraging has stopped, that same bird needs a warm place to wait out the cold, and Tarr said conifers provide the best protection on freezing nights and rainy days.

During fall and spring migration, traveling songbirds also require secure stopover sites. Backyards with a diversity of native plants will attract a multitude of native insects, which help feed birds passing through during spring. In the fall, as warblers leave the Northeast on their way to warmer places, they will seek out fruit-bearing native plants. Beyond providing food, these thick shrubs can also provide shelter from predators.

Increasing the amount of natural protection available to the birds in your backyard will help increase the number of species that visit year-round. While planting one or two shrubs can increase cover options for birds, Tarr said, thickly planted trees and shrubs at the edge of a property will likely be more successful in helping to provide shelter. This is especially true if your neighbors also offer bird-friendly habitats, as Tarr noted that “most birds are using a variety of yards to meet their cover and food needs.”

I was reminded of the importance of thinking beyond the feeder this past winter in my attempt to attract cardinals to my yard. I purchased a new lantern feeder and stocked it with safflower seeds, then placed the feeder on my lawn, a few feet away from several others. The feeder attracted little attention for the first few days, even from the squirrels. Surmising that an absence of nearby cover was the issue, I rehung the feeder in a tree branch on the corner of my lawn. Almost immediately, black-capped chickadees and tufted titmice began visiting the safflower feeder. I didn't see any cardinals last winter, but I'm holding out hope for this year.

Providing safe places to feed, roost, and nest can help conserve the bird populations in your area and increase your chances of enjoying a consistent stream of avian visitors. Small actions to create habitat, replicated by thousands of people, can ensure a brighter future for the birds that grace our skies and capture our imaginations.

Lee Emmons is a nature writer. He lives in Newcastle, Maine. The illustration for this column is by Adelaide Murphy Tyrol. The Outside Story is assigned and edited by Northern Woodlands magazine and sponsored by the Wellborn Ecology Fund of the New Hampshire Charitable Foundation: www.nhcf.org.

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