

Landscape with native plants to create habitat that attracts a wide variety of bird species.



Cedar waxwing with a golden currant

Growing a Bird Garden



BY CRAIG
AND LIZ LARCOM

David Schmetterling and Marilyn Marler live in the middle of Missoula on an average city lot. You'd think such a location wouldn't be a birding hotspot, yet over the past several years the couple has identified more than 50 different bird species attracted to their yard.

Their strategy? Call it, "Plant it, and birds will come."

Schmetterling and Marler are among the growing number of Montanans discovering the value of "birdscaping"—creating a residential landscape that attracts birds. The idea has been cultivated over the past few decades by bird-loving gardeners and landscapers across the United States who noticed that some plants attract certain birds and others don't. Over time they have learned that a naturally landscaped yard can attract dozens of bird species. For example, the right flowers

provide nectar for hummingbirds. And insects drawn to native landscaping attract warblers that would never touch a bird feeder. What's more, birds often linger in a birdscaped yard rather than simply nip in for a few minutes to fuel up at a feeder. The right shrubs and trees can make birds feel comfortable in severe weather and safe from predators such as sharp-shinned hawks (though these and other small raptors sometimes appear in birdscaped yards—an extra treat for birders). Shrubs and trees also make fine nesting sites, so you have a chance to hear the chirps of newly hatched chicks and watch the clumsy antics of fledglings. Include a birdbath, and a birdscaped yard serves up everything birds need—cover, food, water, and nesting places—to thrive. In other words, your yard and garden become bird habitat.

Native plant species are key to successful birdscaping. Birds indigenous to a particular region have thrived over thousands of years on local plants. Native vegetation provides a succession of foods at just the right time to get birds through the year, and it survives Montana's temperature extremes. What's more, native plants need no special watering or fertilizing. Another benefit, say Marler and Schmetterling, is that surrounding their home with plant species native only to the surrounding wildlands restores a sense of what Schmetterling calls "regional distinctiveness" to their property. "We like having plants that are from here and in many cases are found nowhere else," he says.

Another reason for using native vegetation to draw birds is that it rarely attracts nuisance bears the way commercial bird food can.

"Bears can become addicted to bird seeds," says Kristi DuBois, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks native species biologist in Missoula. "And then they hang around a yard and create a human safety problem." Bears are unlikely to "raid" your wild-growing bird

foods because they can find the same items in the wild. For instance, bears gorge on woodland huckleberries but generally stay clear of native berries in backyards because the source is not concentrated enough to make the visit worthwhile. And though they often raid hummingbird feeders, bears are not known to sip nectar from backyard wildflowers.

When it comes to birds, having bugs around is a great thing. Baby birds especially need insects to survive. But most foreign plants found at garden centers are unfriendly to native bugs that birds eat. Douglas Tallamy, a professor of entomology at the University of Delaware and author of *Bringing Nature Home: How Native Plants Sustain Wildlife in Our Gardens*, writes that the alien ornamentals that dominate most yards produce physical and chemical defenses that native insects



Birdbath in a garden of native plants

haven't evolved with. The bugs die or move elsewhere. That leaves birds with less food and forces them to move elsewhere, too.

Schmetterling, an FWP fisheries biologist, and Marler, a University of Montana botanist, understand that many homeowners balk at the thought of attracting insects. "But

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we don't consider insects a problem," Schmetterling says. "We like having caterpillars and moths and native bees in our yard. We consider them to be beneficial, not to mention that they provide food for birds." Butterflies are especially welcome. "We like seeing them as much as the birds," he adds.

The popularity of birdscaping appears to be growing in parts of Montana. Sharon Browder, a landscape designer in the Bitterroot Valley, says nearly all her clients want

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Great for golf but not birds

There's nothing wrong with a traditional lawn if you like the clean, manicured look—and don't mind endless mowing, weeding, and watering. But if you like to see birds, the traditional lawn is not the place to look. You may get a few robins searching for worms when the sprinkler is on and, of course, the universally present house sparrows, but not much else.

gardens and landscapes that attract birds. Alex Blake, co-owner of Blake's Nursery in Big Timber, says so many of his customers want to attract birds with their gardens that he's having trouble locating enough native plants to fill the growing demand. "We grow some of our own, and we plan to grow even more," he says.

The nursery has had success producing custom mixes of native grass species and promoting "bio-hedges." The diverse mixes of mostly native trees and shrubs block wind, attract birds, add year-round color, and

need little watering.

Interested in birdscaping your property? You'll find loads of information on-line (see page 35), ranging from basic how-to manuals to detailed guides on soil chemistry, sod removal, plant disease, and more. Some garden centers can provide advice or direct you to landscape designers with expertise in native planting. Keep in mind that many nurseries deal almost entirely with plants not from your region and may lack knowledge about true natives. (Some nurseries label as "native" any plant indigenous to the United States.)



Dotted blue butterfly on shrubby cinquefoil



Rufous hummingbird

LEFT TO RIGHT: ISTOCKPHOTO; KRISTI DUBOIS; BECCA WOOD

Here are some rough guidelines to get you started birdscaping your property:

1. Map the yard.

Before you start planting, start drawing. Sketch a rough map of your yard, including sidewalks, driveways, and existing trees. To determine appropriate plants to place in different areas, you'll need to figure out sun exposure, annual moisture, topography, drainage, and views you want to preserve or screen out. For example, if most of your yard is on a shady, north-facing slope, then prairie plants likely won't get enough sun to thrive. Similarly, a thirsty, shade-loving red-osier dogwood will probably die on an open, south-facing slope.

2. Learn about local native plants.

The vegetation that will grow best in your yard was likely there before your house was built. Walk through the nearest open space to get a sense of what species thrive in your area's particular soil and annual moisture. Ask advice from neighbors who garden and landscape using native species. Visit nearby wildlands to become familiar with local plant communities. And remember that just because a plant is native to Montana doesn't mean it will grow well in your area. The



Marler and Schmetterling's birdscaped backyard

blanketflower that blooms in sunny Jordan might wither in shady Troy.

The sidebar on page 34 lists bird-friendly plants recommended by Montana experts. Another great source is the Montana Native Plant Society website (mtnativeplants.org), which has recommendations for each area of the state. Birds enjoy a wide range of plant sizes, shapes, fruits, and seeds, so the more diversity the better. Consider a dozen or so species your first planting year, then expand later. Schmetterling and Marler have planted more than 100 species native to the Missoula area. "There's always something blooming, from buttercups in March to rabbitbrush still flowering in October and November," Schmetterling says.

Another resource is the U.S. Department of Agriculture plant database, which shows pictures of most native plants. Click on the "Plant Guide" to learn more about the plants that interest you. Write down the scientific name of each species you intend to purchase. Plants go by many different common names; by knowing the scientific name, you can be sure you are getting what you want.

3. Design the plantings.

Just because you are creating wildlife habitat does not mean your bird garden has to look like an overgrown jungle. You can give native landscaping a tidy look by edging grass from other plantings, lightly pruning shrubs, and installing stone, gravel, or wood chip walkways. Marler contains milkweed, goldenrod, and other plants that spread quickly by planting them in a pot or bucket with the bottom removed.

In the backyard, Browder's native landscaping designs become less constrained. There she aims to create a more natural look, while still providing the benefits her clients want, such as privacy, shade, color, and birds.

Native landscaping does not necessarily mean kissing your manicured lawn goodbye, either. Schmetterling and Marler have retained small islands of lawn just for sitting. Browder retains larger areas in backyards for pets and play areas, landscaping around the borders. Even converting just

10 percent of a lawn to native vegetation can make your yard more attractive—both to people and birds.

Schmetterling notes that a vacant lot overgrown with weeds doesn't qualify as a native garden. "A native garden doesn't mean you just let it go wild," he says. "There still needs to be thoughtfulness. You still need to maintain it. You can't just let it grow into a weed patch and call it a native planting."

Think about what you want from your

"A native garden doesn't mean you just let it go wild. There still needs to be thoughtfulness. You still need to maintain it."

plantings in different seasons. Grasses, for example, often look best in winter, poking up through the white snow. Evergreens shield your house from winter storms and provide shelter for birds. Deciduous trees generally are planted on the south and west

sides of a house to shade it in summer, while allowing warm sunlight in through the bare branches in winter. Use wildflowers and fall foliage to add a spark of color.

Deer are less likely to munch on native landscaping than they are on ornamentals. But that's not always the case. Some native trees—quaking aspen saplings, for example—are deer magnets. If your neighborhood is plagued by hungry deer, ask the nursery staff which plants are most deer resistant.

4. Buy plants.

With planting plan in hand, it's time to purchase your grasses, forbs, shrubs, and trees. Buying native is more difficult than running down to the local superstore for a flat of impatiens. Call local nurseries to see if they sell the plants you're looking for. Most carry a few native species, but don't be surprised if you have to visit a nursery out of town to find a wide variety. Visit the Montana Native Plant Society website and contact a local



Silver buffaloberry

CRAIG & LIZ LARCOM

chapter for advice on the closest nurseries to your town that carry native species. Browder says she has been finding more and more small nurseries in the Missoula area and Bitterroot Valley offering natives. She also recommends looking for native plants at farmers' markets.

Don't dig up native plants from the wild unless rescuing some from an area about to

be developed or cultivated. When asked, many landowners or developers are glad to let you take plants from a building site. Another option is to collect seeds from wild plants for planting on your property.

5. Plant.

Nurseries and garden centers offer plenty of advice on how to get your plants into the

ground. Be sure to water new plantings regularly the first year until they take root. A layer of wood chips or mulch around new plantings will keep weeds down.

6. Enjoy.

Schmetterling says that within the first year of planting, he and Marler began seeing more birds around their house. And after just a few years, they had identified dozens of species. "It's always fun just to look around in the garden any time of the year and see what's out there," says Schmetterling. Many people think they need to leave town to get their wildlife fix. But with a birdscaped yard, you can stay home and let the wildlife come to you. "I'm outdoors a lot with my job or when I'm hunting or fishing, and I get to see wildlife all the time," says Schmetterling. "But there's something really gratifying about seeing a chickadee in the backyard eating aphids off a serviceberry you planted yourself." 🐿️

Gardening and birding blogs

Look for more information on native landscaping on the blog maintained by David Schmetterling. He includes before and after photos of his and Marler's garden; tips on dealing with squirrels, cats, and other unwanted visitors; suggestions for site preparation, plant selection, and garden design; and more:

montanawildlifegardener.blogspot.com



Other bird and garden blogs:

- gardeninggonewild.com
- gardenrant.com
- daffodilplanter.blogspot.com
- smallgoatgarden.blogspot.com
- bikegarden.blogspot.com
- prairieice.blogspot.com
- birdstuff.blogspot.com
- birdsinyourbackyard.com

PHOTOS BY MARILYN MARLER

Montana plants with high bird appeal



Greene's mountain-ash Rocky Mountain juniper Blanketflower Dotted blazingstar Woods' rose

Common name	Scientific name	Plant type	Notes
Black hawthorn	<i>Crataegus douglasii</i>	Tree	Early flowers, early berries for birds.
Chokecherry	<i>Prunus virginiana</i>	Tree	Berries attract birds.
Saskatoon serviceberry	<i>Amelanchier alnifolia</i>	Tree	Earliest flowering, earliest berries, blossoms draw hummingbirds.
Red-osier dogwood	<i>Cornus sericea</i>	Tree	Winter flowers. Berries draw catbirds and others. Needs moisture.
Greene's mountain-ash	<i>Sorbus scopulina</i>	Shrub/tree	Berries feed birds in late winter. Distinct from European ash.
Quaking aspen	<i>Populus tremuloides</i>	Tree	Borers attract woodpeckers.
Rocky Mountain juniper	<i>Juniperus scopulorum</i>	Tree	Berries feed birds in winter.
Golden currant	<i>Ribes aureum</i>	Shrub	Early spring flowers draw hummers. Berries feed many bird species.
Oregon grape	<i>Berberis repens</i>	Shrub	Hummingbirds like flowers. Berries for other birds.
Woods' rose	<i>Rosa woodsii</i>	Shrub	Birds eat rose hips in late winter.
Silver buffaloberry	<i>Shepherdia argentea</i>	Shrub	Songbirds eat berries in late summer.
Dotted blazingstar	<i>Liatis punctata</i>	Flower	Important nectar source for butterflies. Flowers attractive to birds.
Beebalm or wild bergamot	<i>Monarda fistulosa</i>	Flower	Easy to grow. Hummingbird favorite.
Blanketflower or common gaillardia	<i>Gaillardia aristata</i>	Flower	Juncos and other birds eat seeds.

LEFT TO RIGHT: CRAIG & LIZ LARCOM; CRAIG & LIZ LARCOM; MARILYN MARLER; CRAIG & LIZ LARCOM; CRAIG & LIZ LARCOM

Resources for native plant gardening

- **Montana Native Plant Society** offers guidelines for selecting native plants for landscaping in Helena, Bozeman, Missoula, and the Flathead Valley. Contact local chapters for advice on where to buy native plants in your area. Visit them at mtnativeplants.org, or write to P.O. Box 8783, Missoula, MT 59807.
- **Natural Resources Conservation Service's** "How To Landscape with Native Plants in the Northern Great Plains and Rocky Mountains": mt.nrcs.usda.gov/technical/ecs/plants/xeriscp/, or (888) 526-3227.
- **USDA Plant Database:** www.plants.usda.gov. See the site's "Plant Guide."
- The National Wildlife Federation's **Backyard Wildlife Habitat Program:** nwf.org/backyard.
- **Landscaping for Wildlife** by Carrol Henderson. Though written for Midwestern homeowners, much of the information in this book is applicable to Montana. Available from many on-line booksellers.



Green-tailed towhee

BOB MARTINKA