

High Desert - Creating a Wildlife Habitat

This is the only intentionally repeated article that I've written. Andreas Birk, the HeadsUp site manager for High Desert, suggested we try to gain certification of High Desert (common area) as an official Wildlife Habitat. The Landscape Committee thought this was a great idea so this is our attempt to let you know what that entails. You can of course apply for your own landscape too as I have done with mine. So here is the original article.

Typically real estate development disturbs large areas of the natural habitat, leaving wildlife to fend for itself. When High Desert was originally developed one of the basic precepts was that the development be done sustainably. Sustainability meant that design and construction would be done in ways intended to preserve the natural beauty of the property - that development would respect nature. A large percentage of the land would remain untouched so that the rich habitats for plants and animals would continue to be available. The arroyos would remain in their natural state with only vegetation enhancement to increase wildlife habitat. So, as you can see, the idea of providing wildlife habitat is part of the legacy of living here. We have a head start in creating a backyard wildlife habitat because the natural environment is at our door step. Our job is to blend the natural with a planned garden environment.

To create your own wildlife habitat you have to provide four elements: food, water, cover, and nesting areas. With these four elements you'll attract lots of wildlife.

Food

Native plants encourage native wildlife, so using them will provide most of the nectar, pollen, seeds, nuts, berries, and insects that are needed.

There are three ideas you may not think of related to providing food:

- 1) Food needs to be available year round for year round residents and for migrating birds so don't cut off your seed heads, prune your trees and shrubs, or cut grasses until spring when other foods are present.
- 2) Include plants that attract insects for insect eaters. You don't want to kill that first flush of aphids because then there won't be food for baby ladybug beetles or other beneficial insects.
- 3) Provide food for all the life stages (larval, nymph, and adult) of the wildlife you want to attract. Plants selected for different life stages may vary greatly, e.g. butterfly larva (caterpillars) like to eat the leaves of fennel, dill, or rue. The adult butterfly looks for nectar and pollen sources instead.

You'll also need to provide supplemental food if we have a drought or long intense cold spells. Be sure to include a mix of evergreen and deciduous plants which can be enjoyed by both you and the wildlife and provide winter interest.

Water

Wildlife needs clean sources of drinking water and they need water to bathe in. You can provide water in various forms and you can provide more than one type. You can use ponds, streams, fountains, bird baths, misters, and puddles/saucers. Water noise and motion attract birds, and streams and waterfalls rate high for both. For ground feeding birds put the water dish close to the ground. However, most birds want the water higher with some shelter nearby, but not so close that predators can hide in it. I have an urn fountain in my front yard and the house finches and sparrows like to sit on the edge with water running over their feet. I have a pond and stream in the back yard. The stream is ideal for bird bathing and the pond has cobble on one edge which makes it easy for birds to drink.

Cover

You need to provide cover so wildlife can be sheltered from bad weather and so they have places to hide from predators. Grasses, tree cavities, snags, brush, and rocks all provide good cover. A mixture of sun and shade areas is also good. Even thorny plants work well. While we typically think of grass, shrubs, and trees as cover, bird houses can also be cover. Be sure to select a birdhouse designed for the species you want to attract. Designing a proper birdhouse is an art. The size of hole, the roof, whether or not it has a perch, and access for cleaning are all important.

Nesting Areas

Nesting is different than cover because you must consider what parents need to provide for their young. That means providing grasses, twigs, plumes or dryer lint for building a nest, a protected area for the young, food nearby for the babies, water nearby, and training areas. One of the joys I encountered last year was watching a mother bird train her young to fly in the area around my daylily beds. I'm not sure why this was such a great spot for training, but the beds seemed to provide a soft spot for missed landings!

Changes to Garden Practices

There are some changes you may need to make to your garden practices if you want to create a habitat. Discontinue the use of herbicides and pesticides, which damage the microbial life in the soil, and affect reproduction in many species. You'll also need to be in tune with nature's cycles which may mean having patience when you want to remove seed heads, leaves, twigs, other garden litter, and cut grass. Garden litter helps wildlife overwinter.

To Attract Specific Wildlife

Although all wildlife need the four elements above, within those elements wildlife have different preferences so the following section will tell you what to provide to attract specific wildlife.

For butterflies you will need to provide host plants (sunflowers, hollyhocks, hackberry, or hawthorn for larval feeding), nectar plants (butterfly bush, pin cushion flower, butterfly weed, asters), maybe rotted fruit, flat landing pad flowers (think yarrow and pin cushion flower), puddling areas, and rocks for sunning themselves. And remember that the larval stage of a butterfly is a caterpillar, so if you squash them, you won't get any butterflies. Although not as colorful as butterflies, moths are still needed to

pollinate plants like yuccas and datura. Moths prefer white flowered plants and night blooming plants. Like butterflies moths also need pollen, nectar, and host plants and have life stages.

To attract hummingbirds, you will want to provide tubular flowers (red preferred), and resting places. Favorite nectar sources include: agastache, various penstemons, red yucca, salvias like cherry sage, and desert willow. For resting, they like evergreens and other trees – and even tomato cages! Other birds prefer seeds (thistles and sunflowers, chocolate flower for the goldfinches), nuts (pinon for the mountain jays), and berries (currants, grapes, western sand cherry, hawthorn, mahonias and many more). Robins love my grapes. Other birds also need grasses and the plumes from apache plume for nesting and various types of sumac, four wing saltbush, mountain mahogany, chamisa, and beargrass for cover.

Bees prefer flowers they can climb into and make contact with pollen. Native bees, which are a little smaller than European honey bees and are solitary bees, prefer a tubular nesting area that can be sealed up. All bees like blue/purple flowers so if you're afraid of bees avoid blue flowered ones near your entrances. Favorite nectar sources include flowers from: blue mist spirea, lavender, purple prairie clover, and prickly pear or cholla.

Since you won't be using pesticides, you'll need to rely on beneficial insects - the natural predators that eat your pests. Pollen and nectar will attract adults and insects like aphids are food for the larval and nymph stages. Beneficials love herbs in the carrot family (cilantro, cumin, dill, caraway, and parsley), asters, purple coneflowers, goldenrods, sunflowers, tickseeds, and native wildflowers. They also need nesting and hiding locations – what you may call “garden litter”.

Lizards appeared in my landscape when only weeds were here. To attract lizards you need rocks and other niches for them to hide or nest in, and insects such as ants for them to eat (I must have a wonderful supply of insects because I have so many lizards). Lizards love asters, mallows, and lavender.

If you want turtles you'll need hiding and nesting places for them, insects, and rotted food. Adult turtles eat both plants and insects. Turtles want clear pathways to water and a secure place to hibernate.

I have dragonflies at my pond – an orange one and a turquoise one that appear each year. Dragonflies eat mosquitos, gnats, flies, bees, ants, and wasps. They prefer wet areas and the nymphs are aquatic. They also love tall plants like reeds and horsetails where they watch for prey and rest.

Because I believe we have to provide replacement habitat for pollinators, migrating birds, and other wildlife I certified my backyard certified as a Natural Wildlife Habitat several years ago. To visit my habitat send me an e-mail letting me know you'd like to visit. I think you'll be surprised at how “unwild” it can look while still leaving something for the wildlife to feed on. And the wildlife are always fun to watch.