

# Landscaping for Birds on Larger Parcels of Land



**A**s a landowner with property on one of our nation's major flyways for migrating birds, you have a unique and exciting opportunity to help have a profound effect on the success of future generations of birds right in your own "backyard." More than 400 species occur in New Jersey, as nesters, migrants, or winter visitors, but many are suffering declines because of loss of habitat. By re-landscaping for birds you can have a direct hand in changing that situation. You can help more of our local nesters succeed in fledging their young and also help more migrants survive to return through our area each year.

## Planning

Begin by visualizing your property from a bird's-eye view. You may want to photocopy and enlarge the survey map you acquired when you purchased your home as a guide. Sketch in the main physical features: forested woods, fallow fields, planted fields, orchards, lawns, and so on. Now try to imagine for a few minutes how a bird might use your land. Birds need food in the form of seeds, nuts, berries, insects, catkins, nectar, and fruit. Birds also need cover where they can nest and raise their young, and shelter in which to roost, rest, and forage. And, of course birds need water for drinking and bathing. Are there adequate sources of food, water, and shelter to accommodate nesters and migrants? Where can berry-producing shrubs be encouraged or added? Would a meadow managed for birds and butterflies be feasible?

Here are several general principles you'll want to keep in mind as you start putting ideas down on paper for specific habitat enhancements.

1. Incorporate or encourage plants that supply food wherever possible. Abundant and easy-to-find sources of food are essential to all birds and especially our weary migrants who need to refuel quickly as they pause on their journeys north and south.
2. Nurture as many native trees, shrubs, and flowers as possible. Native plants are especially suited to our growing conditions and our native birds are adapted to feeding on what they provide.
3. Create more edge effect wherever feasible. Edge effect is the term used to describe the increase in food, shelter, and plant diversity where two habitats meet. More edge effect can be created by planting meadows and fields in long strips or by encouraging woodland borders that have amoebae-like edges.
4. Promote evergreen trees and shrubs. Evergreens provide protection from harsh wind and weather as well as cover for mourning doves, house finches, and other early spring nesters.
5. Mass similar varieties of trees and shrubs together where possible. Birds will have an easier time locating holly berries, for example, if several hollies are grouped together.

6. Promote plant diversity so that many different varieties of fruits, seeds and berries are available year-round to the hundreds of different species of birds that nest in or migrate through our state. Keep in mind, too, that many birds rely heavily on insects, especially during migration and when feeding young. Birch, sweetgum, sassafras, and many other native trees and shrubs are important food sources for birds who forage among their branches gleaning insects.

7. Arrange new trees and shrubs so they are varied in height, fullness, and texture. Since different birds forage and nest at different levels of the forest — from the floor to the canopy — it is best to create layers by stepping the vegetation up from ground covers, to medium and large shrubs, and finally to trees.

8. Decrease lawn area. Manicured lawns provide almost no wildlife value.

### **F**oundation Plantings and Shrub and Flower Borders

You can enhance the landscape plantings around your home and gardens by including shrubs such as viburnum, inkberry, blueberry, and cotoneaster which provide fruit for wildlife in addition to attractive foliage and flowers. Many varieties of flowers like cosmos, Mexican sunflower, blazing star, and purple coneflower perform double duty by providing nectar for butterflies as well as seed heads for birds. Beebalm, butterfly bush, and verbena are three other choice nectar plants for butterflies, and hummingbirds find the first two irresistible as well!

### **W**oodlands

Forested areas are vital to the success of the many species of birds that require dense, unfragmented habitat for nesting. Interior-forest nesting species, such as the wood thrush and the sharp-shinned hawk, are on the decline. The best way to manage a large wooded area for birds is to leave the interior forest undisturbed as much as possible, especially during the nesting season. Create larger forested areas by either allowing connecting woods to grow up or by planting new trees to bring the areas together. Another way of enhancing woodlands is to increase tree and shrub diversity by adding new or transplanted varieties of native plants in clearings and along the edges.

### **N**est Boxes & Natural Cavities for Birds

Many species of hole-nesting birds have come to rely on artificial cavities. These birds formerly relied solely on cavities in dead and dying trees for nest sites but now will use wooden nest boxes. Over a dozen species of birds will benefit from bird houses, including the tufted titmouse, Carolina chickadee, eastern phoebe, barn owl, screech owl, purple martin, eastern bluebird, and yellow-shafted flicker. Since each of these birds has somewhat different habitat needs, make sure you have the right conditions before purchasing or constructing houses for specific birds. Of course, leaving dead or dying trees standing is the best management practice as they provide ideal nesting and roosting sites as well as food for woodpeckers, nuthatches, and other bark-gleaning species.

Designs for nest boxes can be obtained by writing to the Endangered & Nongame Species Program, Tuckahoe Field Office, 2201 County Route 631, Woodbine, NJ 08270.

### **G**rasslands & Fields

Open grassland and the birds that are adapted to this habitat are on the decline in New Jersey. You may be able to provide suitable habitat for grassland breeders such as bobolink and meadowlark, as well as a host of additional species of birds and butterflies that will be drawn to the insects, seeds, nectar and cover that abound in weedy fields. You can manage this natural area by plowing and mowing it on a rotating schedule. Divide the area into three blocks, or strips (for maximum edge effect) and plow and mow a different area each year so that eventually every block is mowed every third year to keep woody shrubs and trees and aggressive weeds from taking over.

Additionally, you might want to convert a fallow field into a "food bank" for birds by tilling and planting cultivated seeds on a yearly basis. Stephen W. Kress in his excellent book, *The Audubon Society Guide To Attracting Birds*, suggests the simplest way to create a food patch is to till the soil and broadcast a millet/sunflower mix (fifteen pounds per half acre) over the top.



## Wildflower Meadows

A wildflower meadow, alive with beautiful flowers, butterflies, and foraging goldfinches, looks deceptively "natural," but it does require work to insure its success.

First, weeds and dormant weed seeds should be destroyed before planting begins. There are several different ways to prepare the field. One method is to cultivate the area every two weeks spring through fall. This method creates a "dead seed bed." A second method is to cultivate and then apply a glyphosate-based herbicide in May and July, and again in late August. A third approach is to cultivate and water and then solarize the area by covering the area with a sheet of clear polyurethane. Leave the plastic in place for several weeks until the soil temperature several inches below the surface reaches 140 degrees. July is the best time to solarize a bed in New Jersey since this method relies on the sun's heat.

Planting can be done in early fall or spring. Cultivate the area very lightly, just enough to loosen the top half inch of soil. Choose a seed mix that contains annual and perennial wildflower and grass seed that has been formulated for the Northeast. Mulch lightly with straw or salt hay and keep the area well watered for the first six weeks. If aggressive weeds begin to take over, mow the meadow to a height of roughly 12" before they are able to set seed. You may want to spot treat with herbicide. Companies that specialize in selling wildflower seeds provide excellent sources of information on seed mixes and procedures for insuring beautiful results. (See Resource List on back page.)

## Hedgerows

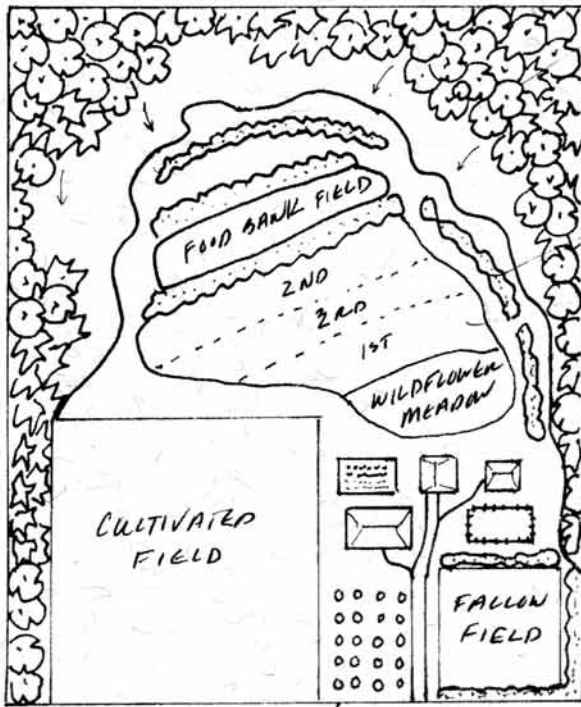
Hedgerows are a good place to watch edge effect in action as birds seek food and cover from predators in these shrubby borders. Your master plan might include ways to unite hedgerows with woodlands to create safer pathways for bird and wildlife movement. Or you may want to delineate areas with planted hedgerows or shrubby borders that you simply refrain from mowing.

## Invasive Plants

You will want to encourage the majority of native and non-native grasses, flowers, weeds, brambles, shrubs and trees that you find on your property. But there are several species of highly invasive plants, such as Oriental bittersweet, Autumn and Russian olive, Japanese honeysuckle, multiflora rose, wisteria, and alianthus, which should be monitored and periodically mowed or sprayed (with a glyphosate herbicide) to limit their impact and spread.

## Providing Water For Birds

Water is essential to birds for drinking and bathing. Providing bird baths year-round is an easy way to help them meet this basic need. Ideally, the bath should be about 3 ft. high and positioned near shrubs or trees where birds can escape from danger. It is a good idea, especially if you have cats, to leave several feet of open space between the bath and the plantings so the birds have time to escape before a predator can approach. Place one or more flat rocks toward the edge of the bath, creating terraces that are 2-4 in. deep. A drip set-up will help migrating birds to locate the water. A heating cable in the coldest winter months will help winter residents.



WOODLANDS

HEDGE ROWS

GRASSLANDS  
MOW EACH PLOT  
ALTERNATING PLOTS  
EVERY 3 YEARS.

ORCHARD

#### SOURCES FOR MORE INFORMATION:

John V. Dennis. *The Wildlife Gardener*.  
Knopf: New York, 1988.

Stephen W. Kress. *The Bird Garden: A Comprehensive Guide to Attracting Birds to Your Backyard throughout the Year*. Dorling Kindersley Limited. 1995.

George Petrides. *A Field Guide To Eastern Trees*.  
Houghton Mifflin: Boston, 1988.

Michael Pollan. *Second Nature: A Gardener's Education*.  
Atlantic Monthly Press: New York, 1991.

Patricia Sutton, Karen Williams, and Ken Soltesz.  
*Backyard Habitat for Birds, Butterflies, and Dragonflies: A Guide for Landowners and Communities in New Jersey and Surrounding States*. New Jersey Audubon Society/Cape May Bird Observatory. Cape May, NJ 1997.

Sara Stein. *Noah's Garden: Restoring the Ecology of Our Own Backyards*. Houghton-Mifflin: Boston, 1993.

Sara Stein. *Planting Noah's Garden*. Houghton-Mifflin: Boston, 1997.

Sara Stein. *Planting Noah's Garden: Further Adventures in Backyard Ecology*. Houghton-Mifflin: Boston, 1997.

Guy Sternberg and Jim Wilson. *Landscaping with Native Trees (The Northeast, Midwest, Midsouth, and Southeast Edition)*. Chapters Publishing. 1995.

Conserve  
Wildlife



N.J. Division of Fish, Game & Wildlife  
Endangered & Nongame Species Program



This and many other exciting projects are funded through NJ's Endangered Wildlife Conservation Fund on your State Income Tax and Conserve Wildlife license plates. For more information, or to make a direct donation, please write the Division of Fish, Game and Wildlife's Endangered & Nongame Species Program at P.O. Box 400, Trenton, NJ 08625-0400.