

Let's give our birds a hand — plant some natives

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The prothonotary warbler often forages above standing or slow-moving water.

Photo Courtesy of Douglas W. Tallamy



Except in winter, up to 90% of the Carolina chickadee's diet comes from insects and spiders, according to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology.

Photo Courtesy of Douglas W. Tallamy

It's no big secret that many of us really enjoy the sight and sounds of our birds. The fact that you're reading this column may indicate you are part of that group. Per the 2011 Census, 47 million people in the U.S. consider themselves to be bird watchers.

Some of us in recent years have noticed that perhaps we are not seeing as many birds as we used to. Indeed, in a breathtaking study published in 2019, research by the renowned Cornell Lab of Ornithology showed that almost one-third of North American birds have disappeared since 1970.

Put another way, there are about 3 billion fewer individual birds here now than there were 50 years ago. That number is truly staggering.

There are a number of well-understood causes of this catastrophic decline in our bird populations and conservation organizations worldwide are doing what they can to address them. The National Audubon Society is working on a Plant Natives For Birds initiative to encourage citizens to help address the loss of bird-friendly habitat across the country.

Human development in all of its many forms has eliminated incredible amounts of natural habitat that originally supported untold numbers of birds and other wildlife. Audubon's approach in this area is based on the idea that if individual property owners were to naturalize parts of their property, some of this lost habitat could be restored.

In his New York Times bestselling book, "Nature's Best Hope: A New Approach to Conservation That Starts in Your Yard," Douglas W. Tallamy writes that 40 million acres of land in this country consists of turf grass lawn areas, an area bigger than all of New England. Tallamy envisions a future where vast amounts of bird friendly habitat could be created by property owners by converting a portion of their lawns back into bird habitat.

Turf grass lawns offer very little to birds by way of cover, food or nesting spots, whereas naturalized areas can be veritable bird meccas.

Audubon's Bird Friendly Communities and Plant Natives for Birds programs support just such a model.

It turns out that species of trees and plants that are native to an area provide much more food for birds year around than do "exotic" species from other parts of the country and the globe. This is especially true in the spring and summer seasons, when most birds breed and raise young.

Most songbirds feed their young primarily insects — soft-bodied insects such as caterpillars and worms that are abundant on native plants and often much, much less common on non-native species.

Lycoming Audubon Society and Seven Mountains Audubon Society are working with Audubon Pennsylvania on a Bird-Friendly Blooms initiative to try to increase the availability of native nursery stock in our areas and to encourage property owners to plant natives and help the birds.

We have initially focused on a dozen species of native trees, shrubs and perennials — our "2020 Birdy Dozen" — and we're working with local nurseries to promote planting natives.

In Lycoming County we have partnered with Ettinger's Nursery and Landscaping to promote the use of native plantings. Ettinger's has a supply of most of the "Birdy Dozen" species in stock as well as some additional natives. The nursery has featured this program since June and will be continuing with the program through the fall, including during its Fall Festival on Sept. 12.

Seven Mountains is working with Steve Kidd, of the Perennial Gardens Native Nursery. While his nursery is in New Bloomfield, Perry County, visitors to the Lewisburg Farmer's Market may recognize his green oasis of trees, shrubs and native flowers there. He has a large array of the "Birdy Dozen" natives and has a wealth of knowledge both about plants and birds.

Seven Mountains is planning to collaborate with Perennial Gardens on a plant and winter bird feeding event in early October, an excellent time to plant trees and shrubs that will help feed your birds next year.

Audubon hopes that you will plan to visit Ettinger's or Perennial Gardens soon to begin your own "plant natives for birds" adventure. If you have another favorite nursery, by all means check out their stock of natives and encourage them to order more of these bird-friendly species for next year.

For more information about Bird Friendly Communities and Planting Natives for Birds, visit [Audubon.org](https://www.audubon.org).