



BACKYARD nature center News

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For the Love of Birds, Gardening and 38 Years Later

There's a reason that I write this article! So often, when I'm talking with a customer, I'll turn to a product and say "I have this one in my yard", so I can attest to it's success. After a while....I'm sure it sounds a little hokey, but it's real. When something is broken or bumped in shipping, and looks like it fell off a truck going 60 mph, it normally comes home with me. I twist it, turn it, pull the dents out add a new tray, touch up the paint or hammer a new roof on it.

At any rate...it's true. I have quite a collection of pieces and parts on the shelves in our garage. It's like the inventory of the unwanted, the rejects! Works for me.

Just for fun, I thought you might enjoy a peak into our bird/human habitat. All the pictures on this page are in a small wooded, one acre of trees, shrubs and perennials, that we've lovingly planted in the 38 years since we built our home. It all started with three little 8' cottonwood trees. Considering the future, we positioned our house at an angle to fit just right in among the future giants. How time flies and plants grow! They are now above 60'! We live in a neighborhood with folks on both sides of us but now the leather leaf viburnums, honeysuckle bushes, red cedars, service berry, London Plain and pine trees have formed a natural fence between us and the yard next door. We learned the benefits of graduated plantings during our fun days as Extension Master Gardeners. We chose seed and berry producing varieties with the wildlife in mind. In front of the trees are bushes, in front of the bushes are rows of daylilies, in front of the daylilies are red salvia, and so on. The birds seem to find their favorite outlook in the varying heights of vegetation and their favorite meal in either the seed & suet feeders or the berry bushes.

With each year, we are able to find a new project to tackle. One year, Nick hand dug, a small pond complete with water fall and plant ledges for growing marginal water plants. Unfortunately, until the water lilies cover the top of the pond, egrets and kingfisher, attempt fishing for bright goldfish and frogs. It's a sight to see but it's not long before everybody has a hiding place. The pond runs 365 days a year, even with freezing temps and the birds bath and drink on the giant flat rocks of the waterfall. It can be like "Wild America" right out the living room windows.



Sunlight can be a problem with this shady habitat. It's been a challenge keeping a vegetable garden but we've managed. Three years ago we removed more lawn, raked it free of competing grass and randomly seeded with wild-flowers in the sunniest spot in the yard. A broken concrete birdbath base holds a sundial and anchors itself regally in the center of the wildflowers. Butterflies and Hummingbirds love the coneflower, black-eyed susans, correopsis, agastache, gallardia, bee balm, and butterfly milkweed.

It's not manicured, nor are the bushes perfectly shaped and trimmed. Each year, we have less "lawn" followed by more and more planting areas filled with perennials. We have a decent compost bin in the garden that the raccoons regularly rummage through at night. Living next to the river, we occasionally catch black rat snakes trying to invade a nest box. That might scare some folks, but there seems to be a nice balance, a natural balance. Drinking coffee in the morning or a glass of wine in the evening while sitting on the screened porch, we view our bird/human habitat with wonder and a grateful heart that we are able to plant, dig and, share our lives with the creatures of the garden!

Amazing Goldfinches

Like little balls of sunshine, they fly through our lives, leaving joy and wonder in their wake. The American Goldfinch is one of the most sought-after birds. They inspire people from coast to coast to hang special feeders and to offer special seed in an effort to win the birds' hearts and their presence. What is it about goldfinches that creates an "I want to feed them!" frenzy in humans?

Their color certainly is a start. They are yellow—the bright, clear, defining yellow of lemons and daffodils. And, as if the yellow wasn't enough, there's just the right amount of stark black as contrast—a little here, a little there—insuring that the yellow jumps out at us.

But it can't just be color. After all, our lives are full of color.

Maybe it's the song, though not as stylish as Mockingbirds, as persistent as wrens, or as tuneful as robins, goldfinches chatter quietly year-round. They have a complicated little

ditty that you might have trouble humming, but it is instantly recognizable as something familiar.

But many birds have more beautiful songs and sounds.

I suppose it could be the birds' motion. Goldfinches fly with a kind of joie de vivre that would brighten any day. And they are extremely agile, feeding happily right-side up, upside down, side-to-side, and sometimes in directions that defy both logic and gravity.

But all birds can fly, so it's probably not just their move-

ments that we admire.

It could be that, more than most birds, goldfinches are dependent on seed. Perhaps

we feel we can contribute more to their well-being. In fact, goldfinches are so seed-dependent that they even feed partially digested, regurgitated seed to their young. Most backyard birds, no matter how much seed they eat as adults, feed insects to their young. This also contributes to the goldfinches' habit of bringing the young to the feeders soon after they fledge.

Maybe it's the birds' large populations. Goldfinches generally travel and feed in flocks. When attracted to a feeder, goldfinch numbers often grow until the birds almost overwhelm the feeder's capacity.

But, no, if numbers were everything, we would be thrilled with the arrival of blackbirds...and few of us are!

Maybe we are enamored with goldfinch unpredictability. Goldfinches tend to wander at will, leaving a perfectly good feeder for no apparent reason three weeks later and act as though they never left. Maybe it's just a case of absence making the heart grown, only to show up fonder. But the logical extension of that would take us back to blackbirds. No, it can't be any one thing. The secret of the goldfinch's backyard stardom is the whole package: color, sound, motion, behavior. They are a perfect combination of startling and delightful, musical and visual. They are free spirits and feeder dependents, abundant and absent.

Whatever it is that tickles your bird-feeding fancy, goldfinches are likely to oblige.



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As a rule of thumb, if the bird is feathered and mobile, it is likely a fledgling on the ground on purpose.

Most leave the nest before they are fully flight worthy. It is part of the process. Young birds are too crowded in the nest to develop the muscles they need to fly, so mom and dad encourage them to take a first step that usually leads them to the ground. For a day or more, the youngsters will hang out on the ground or in low shrubs and gather strength while their parents feed and train them. Sitting quietly, they cry out to be fed when they recognize their parents. Stretching and hopping, exercising their wings, they eventually learn what wings are for and follow the parents.

Don't stop feeding now!

Seed eating birds are still eating seed but are feeding their young yummy fresh insects. Soon, they will be stopping by for a mouthful of suet, yes suet in summer, and feeding that to the kids. Late summer, mom and dad bring the fledglings to the feeders to show them the ropes. Don't let them show up to an empty feeder!



Hummingbird feeders

Just a note...keep your hummingbird feeder changed at least every 2-3 days in summer heat. That much sugar will ferment quickly and you don't want your birds to show up to that. Activity will be sparse at this time but you could see an adult directing their young to your feeder. They will be the fluffy one with new lovely feathers, mom may look a little bedraggled from her summer chores. Our Ruby-Throated hummingbirds will stay as long as the first of September. It's the best time to see great activity.



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Happy Independence Day, July 4!

We appreciate your business!

– Steve, Nick, Cathy, Trudy, Tammy & Drew

