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adventures

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Plants Are for the Birds!

In a backyard garden, a fat caterpillar is munching on the leaf of a tall sunflower plant. Suddenly, a chickadee swoops down and grabs the caterpillar with its sharp beak. Holding the squirming caterpillar tightly, the bird flies up to a hole in a nearby tree. There, the caterpillar becomes a meal for one of the hungry chickadee chicks inside.

When you're hungry, you head to the kitchen. When birds are hungry, they often look for plants. In every kind of habitat—forests and fields, deserts and wetlands, backyards and city parks—plants are an important source of food for birds, and other wildlife, too.

Plants of all kinds are very important to birds for other reasons, too. Tall trees, thick or thorny bushes, or delicate flowering plants: They all help birds survive and thrive in their habitats. Turn the page to find out more about how plants help birds!



This Chestnut-backed Chickadee has found some tasty caterpillars.

BIRDS 
PLANTS

Humans like the way **honeysuckle** smells. Hummingbirds find its nectar tasty, and finches and thrushes eat its berries.



Sunflowers and coneflowers have seeds in the fall that many kinds of birds love to eat. They also attract insects that birds love, too.





**Caterpillar
Math: A Tale
of Two Trees**

Scientists have discovered that more than 550 different kinds of butterflies and moths lay their eggs on native oak trees. (There are more than 50 different species of native oaks in the U.S.) Those eggs hatch into caterpillars that many kinds of birds feed to their young in the spring. On the other hand, only five kinds of butterflies and moths lay their eggs on ginkgo trees—a nonnative species. What do you think would happen to native birds if native oak trees were replaced by ginkgo trees?



Purple coneflower is a native plant that provides seeds for goldfinches and other birds.

The Native Partnership

The plants and wildlife that belong together in a habitat are called “native.” Native plants and animals have evolved over thousands and even millions of years to share a particular kind of place. They have characteristics that are suited for certain conditions: how hot or cold it gets, how wet or dry it tends to be, what the soil is like, and so on. Their lives affect each other in many different ways.

Native animals need native plants to survive and thrive in their natural habitats. Some animals eat plants. Other animals eat animals that eat plants. And some do both. In other words, directly or indirectly, plants feed all the animals on Earth.

For birds, “plant food” can be the leaves, fruits, seeds, and nectar that plants produce. Or it can be the insects and other creatures that plants attract, from aphids and ants to caterpillars, moths, and butterflies, to grasshoppers, lizards, spiders, and snails. Native plants provide the food native birds need. That’s the native partnership!

Plants are important for birds for other reasons, too. Most birds build their nests and raise their young in trees or bushes. Birds rest and roost in trees, hidden from predators and protected from bad weather. Owls and other birds of prey sit in trees, watching and listening for an animal scurrying over the ground below.

BIRDS PLANTS



Elderberry grows fruits that taste sweet to orioles, tanagers, and vireos. People think they’re sweet, too, and make the fruit into jams.



Oak trees are crawling with bugs that birds feed to their chicks, and many birds eat oak acorns. Birds also build nests and find shelter in holes in large oaks.



Goldenrod is beautiful when it blooms, but many people think this beneficial native plant is a weed.

What, Exactly, Is a Weed?

How would you describe a weed? Is it thorny? Plain or flowerless? Stinky? A “bad” plant?

Here’s something that may surprise you: A weed is not necessarily a specific kind of plant. It’s usually a term someone gives to a plant they don’t like for some reason. Maybe it’s too thorny or plain or smelly. Maybe it’s growing where a gardener doesn’t want it to be. Here’s another surprise: What a human calls a weed may be just what a native bird needs. It could be a native plant that has fruit, seeds, or nectar that feed local birds, or it could attract yummy insects that those birds can feast on and feed their young.

On the other hand, a person’s favorite plant could be no help at all to native birds. Gardeners often choose certain plants because native caterpillars and other insects don’t eat them—they are “pest-free.”

What, Exactly, Is a Pest?

Like “weed,” “pest” is a word that gets used for an organism a person doesn’t like for one reason or another. Maybe they bite or sting. Maybe they munch on the leaves of a favorite plant. Or maybe they just look creepy-crawly! But those “pests” could be part of the native ecosystem, providing an important link in a food chain.

Remember that caterpillar eating the sunflower leaf you read about on the cover of this magazine? Would you call that a pest? That caterpillar provided a meal for growing chickadee chicks. Other caterpillars not eaten by birds will eventually transform into beautiful butterflies and moths, which will in turn lay eggs that become caterpillars, and the cycle will continue.

When people spray chemicals on plants to get rid of “pests,” they may be killing food supplies for birds and other wildlife. At the same time they’re limiting their chances of enjoying the sight of a delicate butterfly or moth fluttering by. They may be harming native bees and other insects that help native plants reproduce or provide some other service in nature. The chemicals can also make birds and other wildlife sick and can eventually end up in local rivers or lakes. Maybe sharing our plants with local native creatures is a better idea. Some leaves may be eaten, but a healthy habitat will be able to continue to support the cycle of life.



These beautiful caterpillars could be a feast for hungry birds.



Beware! Invasive Plants!

Nonnative plants that make their way into a habitat and cause a lot of trouble are called “invasives.” One example is purple loosestrife. Brought to the northeastern United States from Europe and Asia in the 1800s, this pretty plant is now a big problem in wetlands, roadsides, and other areas in most of the country. Since it didn’t evolve here, native creatures can’t or won’t eat it. That means it can grow and spread so fast that it crowds out native plant species. As it spreads it damages habitat that supports native birds, fish, and other wildlife. Examples of other invasive plants in the U.S. are kudzu, Japanese honeysuckle, Norway maple, and English ivy. Fewer native plants means fewer caterpillars and other bugs, and that means less food for native wildlife.



Beautiful **buttonbushes** provide seeds for ducks and other waterfowl, while also attracting butterflies. These plants usually grow next to ponds and lakes.



Milkweed attracts many insects, especially caterpillars of the monarch butterfly. Birds use puffy milkweed seedpods to make their nests soft. Goldfinches weave milkweed threads into their nests.

A Friend to Plants Is a Friend to Birds

You can help make your backyard, schoolyard, or local area into a place that birds will love to be and where they can thrive. Here are some things you can do:



Plant native plants.

Find a list of native plants that are just right for your area. All you have to do is type in your zip code here:

[audubon.org/
native-plants](http://audubon.org/native-plants).



Make a seed ball using potting soil, clay, water, and seeds for native plants. This short video shows you how: audubonadventures.org/TakeAction.htm. Place it outside and watch it grow!



Native Plant & Native Bird Search!

Here's a fun way to take a closer look at plants, birds, and other critters that are right outside your door. Take this checklist with you whenever you go out. Keep looking until you've spotted everything on the list! For an extra challenge, use field guides and other sources to try to identify every plant and critter you see.

Check it off when you find...

- A plant with a flower. What color is the flower? What shape is it?
- A plant with no flowers. Does it have flower buds? Do you think it will ever have flowers?
- A seed or nut. Which plant/tree do you think it came from?
- A fruit or berry. Which plant/tree do you think it came from?
- A shrub or bush (not a tree) that's taller than you. How tall is it?
- A seedling or sprout—a plant that's just starting to grow.
- A tree that has needles instead of leaves.
- The tallest tree in your yard/neighborhood/schoolyard. How tall do you think it is?
- A plant you think is a weed. Why do you think so?
- A bird. Where is it? What does it look like? What is it doing?
- Another bird. How is it similar to and different from the first bird you spotted?
- An insect or other "bug" on a plant. What does it look like? What is it doing?
- The most common kind of plant/tree in the area. What does it look like?

Extra Challenge!

Use Audubon's native plant database audubon.org/native-plants, books, and online bird guides to find out what specific plants and birds live in your neighborhood!

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