

ASK YOUR ENVIRONMENTAL COMMISSIONER: How can I help protect my local wildlife this summer?

Fireflies, birds, butterflies, frogs – summertime brings out our favorite wildlife. Who doesn't love seeing chipmunks dart around, ladybugs land on your finger, or hear spring peepers croak their songs? A red cardinal or a tiny hummingbird zipping by fascinates us. But wildlife populations have substantially declined. Bees particularly have been a focus since these and other essential pollinators are being wiped out. There are ways to help rescue our local wildlife which you can do yourself – really simple things you can easily do in your backyard or neighborhood - which will help wildlife and conserve nature.

A bit of background here first. Nature evolves in sync, so trees bud and leaf out when the weather warms up and sunlight increases, ensuring their seeds will grow and photosynthesis can start. Insect eggs hatch when the trees and plants leaf out, so caterpillars will have food to eat and a place to hide from predators. Birds become active and start building nests when there are insects to eat, and leafy places to provide cover from predators and shelter for the nests. Timing is critical here. But this cycle gets interrupted when non-native plants replace native ones, since things are not in sync anymore. Non-native landscaping plants like ornamental trees, shrubs, and flowers are lovely, but they can leaf out too early or too late for wildlife, or the animals and bugs may not even recognize these non-native plants as food or shelter. If there's not enough native plants for food and cover, the insects can't survive, so neither will the birds, pollinators, and other wildlife in the cycle. Populations decline, biodiversity declines, and the detrimental downward spiral continues.

The catastrophic reduction in wildlife populations is due to various factors, but especially habitat loss, decreased biodiversity, and increased use of pesticides and herbicides. Cutting down trees and substituting lawns for natural meadow growth drastically reduces available habitats, diversity, and food sources. Spraying for mosquitoes or ants is convenient, but it also kills a lot of insects which are critical food for wildlife, and pollinators which are essential for plants. Herbicides control not only crabgrass and weeds, but also kill non-target plants, and the chemicals will remain in the environmental for a long time.

Luckily, some of these human activities can be controlled to benefit wildlife, and we can start conserving nature in our own neighborhoods and our own yards. Here's some easy ideas to help save our wildlife, such a creating your own backyard wildlife sanctuary which will replenish resources for our bees, butterflies, birds, and amphibians, both locally and along migratory corridors. And restoring wildlife has added benefits for us, like controlling pesky mosquitoes. These simple ideas can save money too. It doesn't matter if you have a big yard or just two pots – every bit helps, so let's get going and protect our wildlife.

1. **Go Native.** It's not only chic to plant native species now, but it helps wildlife by providing food, shelter, and diversity. Native plants are hardier, better suited to our local climate and soils, and require a lot less care and water to thrive. No need to baby them with fertilizers or pesticides, and their lifecycle is in sync with native wildlife too. There are dozens of beautiful choices for shade, sun, or any soil conditions. Visit <https://www.rumsonnj.gov/env/native-plants.html> to learn more and see photos of the gorgeous flowers.
2. **Feed the Birds.** We love feeding the birds seeds in the winter, but now birds eat mainly insects. Keep feeding them but do it by planting native plants and flowers, which attract insects that feed the birds and flowers which bring pollinators. Birds don't usually forage far from their nesting tree, and a momma chickadee needs up to 9,000 caterpillars to feed her nestlings. Give them a break by planting natives around your yard and they'll come home to you to roost.

3. **Create a Backyard Sanctuary or a Pocket Park.** Bring the local wildlife right to you when you create a backyard wildlife sanctuary. Plant native trees, shrubs, flowers, and grasses to draw in insects which will bring hungry wildlife and provide shelter. Reduce your lawn size by creating a miniature wildlife corridor; don't mow the strip and just let the grass grow wild. Wildflowers will soon find their way there, along with the animals. Even a small strip along your yard perimeter helps. No big lawn? Create a "Pocket Park" which is just a small area you tuck in your yard and either plant with natives or just let it "re-wild;" a rain garden is always a great choice here too. Learn more about these at <https://www.rumsonnj.gov/env/ask-an-ec.html> . No room for even a Pocket Park? No worries – just plant in pots and put one or two around your home. Provide some predator protection, like shrubs, piles of sticks, or even bird houses or a bug hotel. Encourage wildlife to raise their young in your sanctuary by growing native trees, adding nesting boxes for bats or birds, or planting caterpillar-friendly plants. Provide some water for your wild friends to drink or bathe, maybe a birdbath or a rain garden, and they'll be flocking to your sanctuary. No matter the size, you can even have your backyard sanctuary officially designated as a Certified Wildlife Habitat at <https://www.nwf.org/CERTIFY> .
4. **Spread the Word.** One backyard wildlife sanctuary is marvelous, but more are better. Spread the word about protecting local wildlife to your neighbors and ask them to help conserve nature by creating a neighborhood wildlife corridor or at least planting a few pots of native plants. The more native plants in your area, the more wildlife will come.
5. **Plogging Along.** This Swedish custom of picking up discarded plastics and trash while you walk around has many benefits; not only does your yard and neighborhood look cleaner, but you are removing harmful items that hurt wildlife and remain in the environment a long time. So grab a bag to nab that plastic bottle cap (25 years to decompose), or that straw (200 years to degrade) or plastic water bottle (400 years to decompose). If you even pick up just two items on your walk, you've made the environment a safer place for our local wildlife.
6. **Plant a native tree.** All trees look beautiful, but looks are deceiving. Native trees provide much more wildlife value than non-natives. A single adult native oak tree can provide food, protection, shelter for reproduction, and cover for over 4,000 species, according to Dr. Doug Tallamy; but a non-native can host only a dozen species. It's okay if the tree doesn't survive; dead trees are excellent habitats for wildlife.
7. **Reduce or Eliminate Pesticides and Herbicide use.** Bring in the birds, ladybugs, and bats to gobble up your bugs instead of chemically killing both them and the wildlife that depends upon them, or use organic pest controls like eucalyptus and citrus essential oils. Weeds wither under vinegar or boiling hot water; but don't forget to keep some weeds around to entice wildlife.
8. **Bye Bye Night Lights.** There's a reason wildlife sanctuaries aren't brightly lit up; the illumination is blinding to nocturnal animals and migrating birds, who collide with buildings or become too

disoriented to continue migration. So unless you are an airport, turn off exterior house lights at night, or at least add a motion sensor so the lights only turn on when you actually need them. While you're at it, replace regular white light bulbs with yellow LEDs, which are less attractive to insects and more energy efficient.

9. **Make Seed Bombs.** We've all seen barren dirt lots or roadsides where nothing seems to grow, and the precious soil runs off with every rainfall. Create a roadside habitat there by tossing a few "seed bombs," which are just equal parts potting soil and clay mixed into a ball with native seeds like milkweed. The clay absorbs the water to promote germination, the soil adds nutrients, and the seeds do the rest.

10. **Wildlife Can Control Mosquitoes.** Use nature to be your Bug Zapper. Aquatic mosquito larvae are eagerly consumed by aquatic predators including tadpoles, dragonfly larvae, and fish; the *Gambusia affinis* (also known as the mosquitofish) is so effective that mosquito control districts across the country use it as part of their standard arsenal. Once larvae become flying adults, mosquitoes are gobbled up by frogs, bats, birds, adult dragonflies and damselflies. Installing bird and bat houses to lure these predators to your yard, along with providing a water source for the frogs, toads, and dragonflies, will help eliminate the mosquitoes. And don't forget the plants; natural bug-repellent plants include marigolds, lavender, citronella, nasturtiums, tansy, mint, and rosemary.

11. **Visit the OFL Seed Exchange.** Start small with planting natives by visiting the Rumson Environmental Commission's Seed Exchange at the Oceanic Free Library. Pick up a free package of native seeds and start planting in either your garden or just a pot. If you're a gardener, share some of your own native seeds there too. There's a variety to choose from, including taller shrub seeds like NJ Tea Plant, or common pretty flowers like Purple Coneflowers. More horticultural details about the Seed Exchange are available at <https://www.rumsonnj.gov/env/native-plants.html> .