

# Enhancing Bird Habitat AT HOME

By Tom Aversa

The majority of birds complete their migration to Maine by the end of May. Migration is the most exciting time for birdwatchers because we see more species when birds are still on the move. So how do we continue to enjoy birds once the foliage makes viewing more difficult? There are many ways—including trekking to the coast and other open habitats where birds are more easily seen. But there is another great way...

Creating a backyard habitat will bring the birds to you! Planting native trees and shrubs provides what they need. These plants produce flowers, fruits, invertebrates and cover to keep birds in your yard. Plant strategically by choosing rich berry producers like elderberry, viburnum, dogwood, service berry and other species. Non-native but naturalized species like mulberry and crab apple are also good choices. These plants will pay dividends in just a few years. A bird bath or water source is also a great idea. Mounting nest boxes for bluebirds, swallows, chickadees and titmice provides housing. You might mount a kestrel or duck box if you live near fields or open wetland.

Providing bird feeders and suet is a great idea but must be done with caution

because it can attract unwanted visitors such as bear and raccoon. I feed birds all summer long in my rural yard in Unity without a problem, but I recommend that if an unwanted guest appears that you take the feeders down for a spell or figure out how to mount them out of reach of troublemakers. Hummingbird feeders with sugar water can also supplement flowers, but if you don't want to deal with that, strategic planting of native plants with red, pink or yellow blooms will keep hummingbirds in your yard all summer. Unfortunately none of this works if you have free-ranging, outdoor cats. Domestic cats kill (literally) billions of birds each year in the U.S.

You also increase the likelihood of birds using your yard by leaving standing dead trees in areas where they do not pose safety hazards. Standing dead wood is in many ways more valuable than a live tree to birds because it provides insects and a place for woodpeckers to drill nest cavities. Snags also offer perching with good look-outs for birds as well as a nice spot for observers to watch their behavior. Woodpecker holes usually are abandoned each year, but provide homes for the same secondary cavity nesting species that use nest boxes along with mammals like flying squirrels.

Photos by Tom Aversa, clockwise from top right: Cape May Warbler eating elderberry, Pileated Woodpecker on a snag tree, Bluebird pair taking a bath, Nashville Warbler sheltering in elderberry, Red-shouldered Hawk with a good view, male Bluebird at the Richardson Preserve.

