

Creating Native Plant Wildlife Habitat in Georgia

All wildlife requires four basic elements to survive: food, water, cover, and places to reproduce and bear young in safety.

Conserving and restoring native habitats that wildlife depend on is an important strategy for sustaining these treasures.



Doug Janson, Wikipedia

The beautiful painted bunting (*Passerina ciris*) breeding in the coastal Southeast. The eastern U.S. population is suffering due to the illegal pet trade and habitat loss and degradation as humans destroy swampy thickets and woodland edges for development. They are listed as Near Threatened on the IUCN Red List, and on the Partners in Flight Watch List as a species of concern.

All wildlife requires four basic elements to survive: food, water, cover to protect against the elements and predators, and places to reproduce and bear young in safety. A wildlife species' habitat is the area where it finds its food, water, shelter, and breeding or nesting space in a particular arrangement. If we desire our landscapes to have the greatest ecological value for wildlife, we need to mimic natural plant groupings and incorporate as many habitat features as possible.

Plants are one of the most important features of an animal's habitat, because they provide most, or even all, of the animal's habitat needs. Animals in turn help plants to reproduce through dispersal of pollen, fruits or seeds. Consequently, plants and animals are interdependent and certain plants and animals are often found together. So, it is important that plants be selected, grouped, and planted in a way that is ecologically appropriate.

Wildlife species are affected by changes in our landscape and they are suffering from destruction of their habitat. Intensive agriculture and forestry, housing, infrastructure, and industry destroy and fragment wild areas. The native habitat that remains often is in isolated patches and is degraded by pesticides, invasive plant species, and changes in land management. Pesticides have impacted wildlife populations and the food they depend on, and pose a constant threat to the remaining populations. Thus, conserving and restoring the habitats and plants that wildlife depend on is an important strategy for sustaining adequate numbers of these treasures.

Local and migratory wildlife, such as birds, insects, mammals, reptiles, and amphibians, are critically dependent on native plant communities. By implementing the following guidelines, you can create an EcoScapes wildlife-friendly landscape.



UGA Marine Extension and Georgia Sea Grant EcoScapes Program

EcoScapes website:

Google "UGA EcoScapes"

General Guidelines

- Plant locally adapted native plants that are appropriate to your site conditions. Each plant prefers or tolerates a range of soil, sunlight, moisture, temperature and other conditions, as well as a variety of other factors including disturbance by natural events, animals or human activities. Plants sharing similar requirements are likely to be found together in plant communities that make up different habitat types – particular groupings of plant communities commonly recognized as wetlands, meadows, forests, etc. Some plants may tolerate a wider range of conditions than others, and therefore can be found at more than one type of site, in association with a different set of plants at each. By matching plants with similar soil, sunlight, moisture, and other requirements, and planting them to the existing site conditions, the planted landscapes will do a good job of approximating a natural habitat;
- Instead of isolated plantings, such as a tree in the middle of a lawn, group trees, shrubs and perennials to create layers of vegetation. A forest has, for example, a canopy layer (tallest trees), understory layers (various heights of trees and shrubs beneath the canopy) and a ground layer or forest floor. These layers provide the structure and variety needed for shelter, breeding, or nesting space for a diversity of wildlife;
- Plant a variety of evergreen and deciduous (plants that lose their leaves) trees, shrubs, grasses, and other herbaceous plants for food, shelter, nesting and habitat. Keep in mind plants that provide winter food and cover, such as evergreen shrubs and trees;
- Make sure to provide adequate growing space for landscaping plantings. Avoid planting large-maturing trees and shrubs where they will overgrow with overhead

utilities or crowd homes and other structures;

- Reduce or eliminate deadheading of flowers. Leaving plants uncut over the winter provides seeds, shelter, and nesting sites for wildlife;
- Avoid using pesticides, which often kill much more than the intended pests.

Food



Wildlife is not limited to birds; it also includes the many species of amphibians, mammals, reptiles, and insects found in Georgia's Coastal Plain. Pictured is a gopher tortoise (*Gopherus polyphemus*), Georgia's state reptile.

In order to meet the year-round needs of many wildlife species, you will want to supply as much food as possible through locally adapted native vegetation. Here are some tips to consider when planning your wildlife habitat:

- Plant native plants with berries and other fruits such as blueberry, blackberry, black cherry, Carolina cherry laurel, red chokeberry, winterberry, American holly, dogwoods, pawpaw, persimmon, sumacs, inkberry, and cranberry. Check to make sure the plant will fruit. Only the female of some plant species (American holly, wax myrtle, and eastern redcedar) produces fruit. In this case, be sure to provide at least one male plant for pollination;
- Plant native plants that produce nuts, such as oaks, hickories, and American beech that serve as important food sources for mammals and birds;

- Plant composites and grasses with seeds enjoyed by wildlife, such as switchgrass, broomsedge bluestem, purple coneflower, and other composite flowers; allow stems and seedheads of flowers and grasses to remain standing throughout fall and winter;
- Plant native plants that produce nectar and pollen that serve as important food sources for insects and some birds. Check out the additional EcoScapes native habitat guidelines for other native pollinators at <http://gacoast.uga.edu/outreach/programs/ecoscapes/>.
- Cluster similar types of vegetation to allow wildlife easy access to seasonally abundant food sources without excessive movement and increased exposure to predators. Clumping similar species and placing shorter herbs and shrubs in front of taller vegetation improves the appearance of your habitat;
- Plant a series of plants that will bloom throughout the seasons to provide nectar, fruit and seed.
- Running or circulating water (e.g., mister) will attract wildlife, stay cleaner and prevent mosquitoes. Incorporate water conservation practices to minimize water use (e.g., utilize recycled rain harvested water, etc);
- Provide water daily and throughout the year. In summer heat, be sure to keep bird baths clean and replace water regularly. In winter, when temperatures can drop below freezing, remove ice and refill with water daily. Or, if appropriate, use a bird bath heater.

Shelter



Water supplied in a bird bath is a good water source for many birds, mammals, and insects. The pictured bird is a cedar waxwing (*Bombycilla cedrorum*).

Water

All animals need clean fresh water year-round to survive. In addition, most species need water for bathing. Some wildlife species acquire some of their water from the droplets of rain or morning dew that vegetation holds. However, a more constant and reliable source of water is preferred in a wildlife habitat.

- Water supplied in a birdbath or even a small dish of water, changed daily to prevent mosquito growth, will provide some birds, mammals, and insects the water resources they require. A small pond set on the ground can provide not only water for drinking and bathing, but cover and reproductive areas for small fish, frogs and other amphibians and insects. A larger pond can provide for waterfowl, such as ducks and geese, and wading birds such as herons;

All wildlife depends on shelter and cover to protect them from the elements and predators. Providing a variety of shelter sources will provide the necessary cover requirements for a variety of wildlife species.

- Plant a diversity of evergreen trees and shrubs with varying heights to shelter wildlife from wind, weather, and predators. Grouped plantings of evergreens is wonderful for birds that flock and roost together in winter.
- Leave fallen logs and snags (standing dead or dying trees - as long as safety allows) for

habitat. Standing dead tree trunks benefit cavity-nesting wildlife such as woodpeckers and mammals;

- Rock walls or piles, stacked wood, hollowed logs, or brush piles provide home for insects, certain birds, small mammals, and reptiles;
- Fallen logs and leaf litter provide moist places for salamanders, and the many organisms that recycle such organic matter, contributing nutrients to the soil.

Places to Raise Young

Wildlife need safe places to reproduce and nurture their young. When designing a wildlife habitat, consider the following:

- Protect and retain mature trees. These invaluable trees provide den sites for squirrels and other mammals and nesting places for birds;
- Protect and retain snags (as long as safety allows). Snags (standing dead or dying trees) are critical for more than 125 species of cavity-nesting birds and mammals in North America;

- If snags and mature trees are not available, nest boxes can be added to provide cavity nesters with a place to raise their young;
- Dense plantings of shrubs of various heights provide safe areas for many wildlife species;
- Ponds with seasonal or permanent water or a water garden provides much needed breeding grounds for salamanders, frogs, and toads.
- Provide caterpillar larval host plants to ensure the presence of butterflies and moths in your habitat. Check out the EcoScapes native plant habitat guidelines for butterflies and moths at <http://gacoast.uga.edu/outreach/programs/ecoscap.es>.

For more information regarding Georgia's native plants, to utilize the EcoScapes native plant search engine website, or learn more on how to promote and protect wildlife, go to the EcoScapes website: gacoast.uga.edu/outreach/programs/ecoscap.es/.



The value of snags: standing dead trees provide critical habitat for many species of wildlife, such as these pileated woodpeckers (*Dryocopus pileatus*) (Source: sherryboas.com)



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