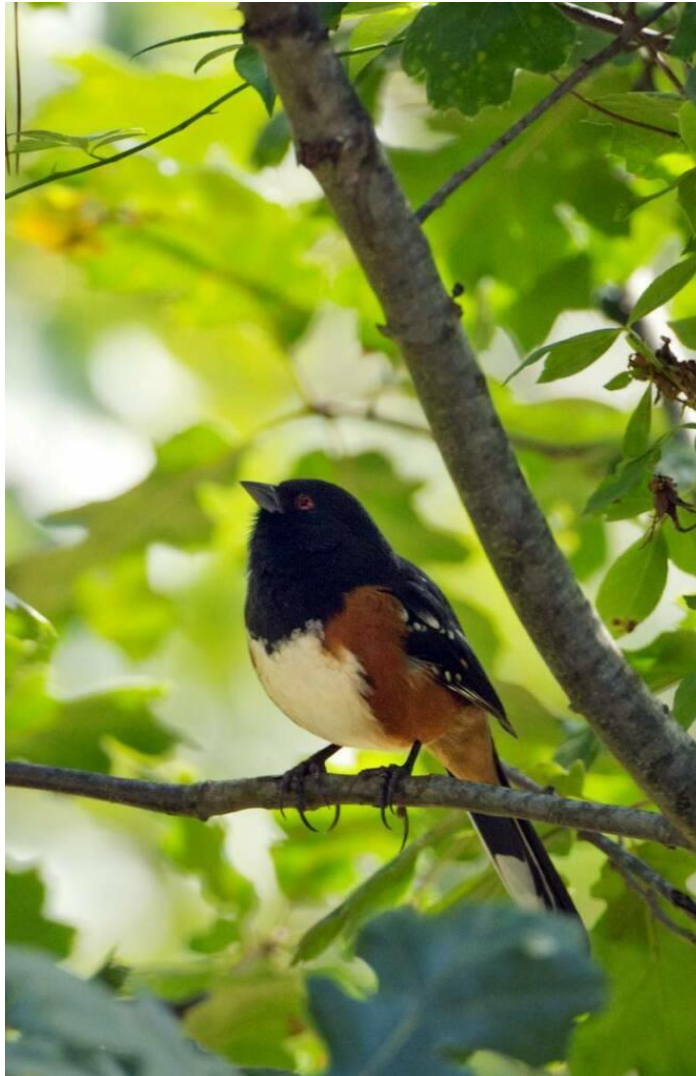


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How to attract more birds to your blooming garden

By SONOMA COUNTY MASTER GARDENERS
FOR THE PRESS DEMOCRAT



A spotted towhee at the Native Songbird Care and Conservation Project in Sebastopol. John Burgess/The Press Democrat.

Want more birds in your garden? Try thinking like a bird.

The garden is more than a plot for growing flowers and vegetables; it is an environment for all its inhabitants. By understanding the behaviors and needs of birds, you can design your garden in ways that help them and charm us.

We gardeners are often concerned with when to plant, what to plant and where to plant. We can increase our pleasure in the garden through a better understanding of the wildlife, especially birds, that inhabit it. Their songs, colors and behaviors are so delightful.

Our yards can help birds and support the biodiversity we all depend on. Birds provide pollination, seed dispersal, nutrient cycling, predation and other ecosystem services.

This is especially important as a 2019 study in the journal *Science* reported the loss of 3 billion birds (one out of every four breeding birds) in the United States and Canada in the past 50 years.

Birds help reduce many flying, crawling, and nuisance insects in our backyards. As an added bonus, when our bird friends feed on insects and spiders, they reduce the need for pesticides.

In the spring and early summer, when migratory birds temporarily stop on their way north and need to refuel or arrive for nesting season, these food sources are critical.

While many birds eat insects, predatory birds like vultures, hawks, and even crows consume rodents and decaying carcasses.

Since decomposing wildlife and rodents can pose disease threats to urban and suburban environments, we can thank predatory birds for consuming and cleaning up those threats.

Attracting birds like hummingbirds helps increase plant pollination. In addition to pollinating, many songbirds disperse seeds when they consume or accidentally transport viable seed and fruit. In turn, an increase in blooms and fruiting plants can lead to increased habitat and hopefully, more birds.

Crucial wildlife corridor

Human development has profoundly fractured natural areas. By providing better habitats for birds, you are building green corridors within your local ecosystem and improving your immediate environment.

When we connect biological corridors, the species that live in them can intermingle and multiply. When their populations are large enough, they are less vulnerable to local extinction through inevitable environmental fluctuations.

We also benefit physically and mentally from the presence of birds.

National Audubon Society studies have shown that birds help lower stress levels, provide mental health benefits and increase physical activity. Who knew all we needed were birds this whole time?

Each bird has its own ecological niche that is the sum of all the bird's physical requirements and all its interactions with other species.

No one kind of food or nesting site, hiding place, foraging area or bathing location is likely to satisfy every kind of bird. The more variety you have in your garden, the more species of birds you are likely to have living there.

Planting native plants, trees, shrubs, perennials and grasses is key to providing the diversity birds need.

To survive, native birds need native plants and the insects that have co-evolved with them. More native plants means more food choices and shelter for native birds and other wildlife.

Many landscaping plants sold in nurseries are exotic species from other countries. Many of those plants have leaves that are unpalatable to native insects and caterpillars, making them poor food sources for native birds. Ninety-six percent of all terrestrial bird species in North America feed insects to their young. Planting insect-proof exotic plants is like serving up plastic food. No insects, no birds.

So, when you think about attracting birds to your garden, think about what birds need — food, water, cover and nest sites - and how you can fulfill these needs in as many different ways as possible.

Join Sonoma County Master Gardeners for a free talk “Gardening With Wildlife: A Bird’s Perspective” April 5 from 10 to 11:30 a.m. at the Los Guilicos Demonstration and Teaching Garden, 1 Los Guilicos Road, Santa Rosa.

We’ll talk about some of our common local birds and how to increase the diversity in your garden. Let’s learn to think like a bird.

The class is free but registration is required at ucanr.edu/site/uc-master-gardener-program-sonoma-county. After registering, you will receive a confirmation email containing information about attending the talk.

Contributors to this week’s column were Mary Ellen King, Patricia Decker and Karen Felker. The UC Master Gardener Program of Sonoma County sonomamg.ucanr.edu/ provides environmentally sustainable, science-based horticultural information to Sonoma County home gardeners. Send your gardening questions to scmgpd@gmail.com. You will receive answers to your questions either in this newspaper or from our Information Desk. You can contact the Information Desk directly at 707-565-2608 or mgsonoma@ucanr.edu.