

Saving the World, a Yard at a Time

Cape Fear Audubon Introduces Bird-Friendly Habitat Award Program

by Charley Winterbauer

If you enjoy watching birds, you'll be interested in Cape Fear Audubon Society's new Bird-Friendly Habitat Award Program. This tool can help you create a plan for a more bird-friendly yard, no matter what your starting point. Along the way, it might also help lower your utility bill, reduce your yard work time, and help balance our local ecosystem.

Each year thousands of birds come through the Cape Fear area, either to nest, or to rest and eat on their way to their final nesting areas. This includes painted buntings, the warblers, and many of the most colorful birds we enjoy in spring and summer. Surveys show we are losing migratory birds at a rate of 1% a year. Why is this? Scientists agree loss of natural habitat—usually caused by increased human population growth and land development—is largely to blame.

In a typical pattern of residential land development, the land is cleared, then roads built and utilities installed. After the houses are completed, lawns and plantings complete the parcel. This planting may seem like a good idea: who wouldn't want green and lush foundation shrubbery? But by planting water-thirsty lawns and exotic plants, native habitats—the ones favored by birds and other wildlife—are being pushed out.

This trend toward "insect-free" plants is welcomed by the homeowner, because the native insects are less likely to be able to use the nonnative plants and therefore won't damage their looks. The imported plants live up to their billing as pest-resistant, but those "pests" include beneficial

insects, ones that help the ecosystem thrive and who are an important food source for our birds. With no native plants to nest in or feed on, the life cycle of birds is severely disrupted. "Many suburban landowners are unaware of the implications their stewardship has on local wildlife," says Matt Collogan, Environmental Education Program Manager at Airlie Gardens. "Landowners intending to do the right thing can end up causing more harm than good."

Most agree that maintaining natural habitats, or reestablishing them, can go a long way to helping balance our natural environment and support our wildlife. But sometimes it can be hard to know where to begin.

Fortunately, Wilmington's Cape Fear Audubon Society club has established the "Bird-Friendly Habitat Award." Modeled on the LEED certification program (the benchmark for environmentally-conscious building and remodeling), the free awards are given to properties that provide a sufficiently bird-friendly habitat. "Turning a backyard into a bird-friendly habitat is not complicated or expensive, and it will make a difference," says Club President Cary Paynter. Society evaluators look at several areas to determine whether a home meets the guidelines for an award, including:

1. Significant percentage of native plants
2. Plant buffers around property
3. Buffers that include a variety of types of plants
4. Reduced lawn and commercial mulch
5. Significant tree canopy
6. Butterfly garden (planting specific native plants to attract butterflies)
7. Control of invasive plants
8. Presence of natural nesting places, nest boxes and water sources
9. Absence of outdoor cats
10. Use of natural means instead of pesticides and chemical fertilizers
11. Rainwater use, composting.



photo by Charley Winterbauer

Qualifying backyards will receive a clay plaque similar to this one, hand-made for Audubon by Wilmington artist Sandra Siemering. Plaques will be 7-8 inches in diameter, and will vary in design. The award shown here depicts a Painted Bunting, and its gold border signifies a gold-level award winner.

There are three levels of awards: Bronze, Silver and Gold. At their web site, the Cape Fear Audubon Society gives more detail on each of these areas, including the specific percentages and requirements as well as steps you can take to improve your score in each area. The evaluation form and application are available on-line at www.capefearaudubon.org, under the "Conservation" tab. Once you've applied, an inspector will visit your site at no charge to determine your final score.

The evaluation sheet itself is a helpful tool in evaluating your property for bird-friendliness. "The brilliance of the bird-friendly habitat program is that it asks some very basic but critical questions of the applicants," says Collogan.

Print one out and walk around your yard. There are probably many steps you can take right now, at no cost, to help make your yard more bird-friendly. These include: making fresh water available year round, providing nesting areas, allowing leaves to remain where they fall or shredding for use as mulch, composting, and hand-watering instead of using sprinklers.

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Cape Fear Audubon Society is a local chapter of the National Audubon Society. Meetings are held the second Monday of each month, alternating between Southport and Wilmington, and guests are welcome. The group supports the region's diverse habitat through meetings, field trips, bird walks and other educational activities. Learn more at: www.capefearaudubon.org

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Controlling invasive species (listed on the evaluation form) and keeping your cat indoors, moving bird feeders to better spots and allowing your shrubs to grow in a more natural form all help attract birds to your yard.

Other measures, such as installing rain barrels, planting a butterfly garden, reducing area devoted to lawn, and planting buffer strips, can be introduced as time and money allow.

For many yards, the largest upfront cost is for the plants. But native species have evolved using only available water (rain) and local soil conditions, so once established they should thrive with little care. And using native plants is the most important component of creating a bird-friendly yard. Native plants, insects and birds have co-evolved in a complicated web of relationships. See the article by

Alistair Glen in the Fall 2009 *Cape Fear's Going Green* "Bringing Birds into the Fall Garden." These native plant suggestions apply all year around—and it's not too early to start planning for fall.

Check the nurseries listed elsewhere in this issue, or try sharing plants with neighbors. You may already have plants conveniently located in your own backyard. Landscape architect Lara Berkley, co-owner of B+O: design studio, suggests you first inventory your own property for volunteer plants you can let mature (sometimes just by not mowing over them) or transplant to another part of the yard. "These plants are conveniently already adapted to your specific site conditions, they're free, and they don't come in containers," she offers. "You'd be surprised how many lovely seedlings pop up between the azaleas and camellias!"

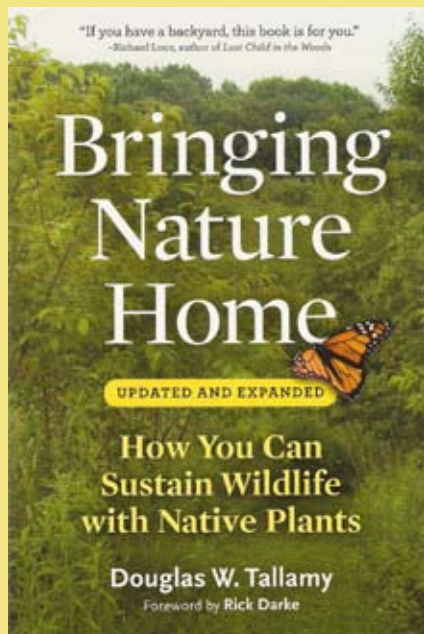
Can looking at our own yards with a fresh eye toward making it bird-friendly really make a difference to our birds? Absolutely, says Paynter. "Very few of us can afford to buy land to set aside for conservation, but most of us have a yard." Collogan agrees, noting "our suburban landscape has the potential to change the tide on biodiversity loss. The more people use this tool, the more habitat our local fauna will have."

The Bird-Friendly Habitat Award Program is a great road map to help you learn about native plants and our local ecosystem, attract more colorful birds to your yard, and reduce your yard maintenance time and cost. And, it just might help save the world, a yard at a time.

Charley Winterbauer is currently Chairman of the Conservation Committee of the Cape Fear Audubon Society.

Recommended Reading

Many area plant and bird enthusiasts recommend reading *Bring Nature Home: How You Can Sustain Wildlife with Native Plants* by Douglas W. Tallamy. The book calls for the backyard gardener to make a difference by incorporating more native plants in their own backyards. Cape Fear Audubon



member Nancy Buckingham likes its argument for promoting native plants over ornamentals: natives need less water, less fertilizer and less maintenance. And they're good for birds and butterflies year-round, not just for a single season.

Charley Winterbauer finds the book's web site particularly useful. He especially likes the lists of "best bets" for woody and herbaceous plants, as these lists show the number of moth and butterfly species supported by each plant. Visit <http://bringingnaturehome.net>.

Read it at the library, or buy your own copy of *Bringing Nature Home* from your favorite local independent bookseller. Area stores that carry the book include:

Pomegranate Books

4418 Park Avenue
Wilmington, NC
(910)452-1107
www.pombooks.net

Two Sisters Bookery

The Cotton Exchange
318 Nutt Street
Wilmington, NC
(910)762-4444
www.twosistersbookery.com

NCCF Native Plant Festival

Volunteers have begun potting trees that will be sold at the North Carolina Coastal Federation's annual Native Plant Festival, which is set for April 23 and 24 at NCCF Headquarters in Ocean. The first day of the sale is reserved for members and the second day is open to the public. The festival features not only native plants, but coastal artists, musicians and non-profit groups. If you would like a booth to exhibit your artwork or the work of your organization or if you would like to make music on the festival's outdoor stage, call Rose at (252)393-8185 or visit www.nccoast.org.

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