



UC Marin Master Gardeners
Telephone: 415/473-4204
Website: <http://www.marinmg.org>

Advice to Grow By ... Ask Us!

GARDEN GOOD GUYS – BIRDS

By Nanette Londeree, Marin Master Gardener

"I hope you love birds too. It is economical. It saves going to heaven." Emily Dickinson

In addition to being economical, birds provide a variety of benefits to the gardener – from their visual and auditory delight to their comic antics and familial behavior, these entertainers can inject a wonderful dimension to the garden. That is in addition to their role as predator, helping to keep down the insect population. One of a gardener's worst nightmares is to watch helplessly as hordes of destructive insects attack your plants. Now, consider that a single bird can gulp down 500 to 1,000 insects in an afternoon! By attracting birds to your garden, you can significantly reduce your pest population - all with little to no effort on your part. That's pretty economical.

Many birds are friends to the gardener as they feast on harmful insects and weed seeds. They can become pests when they consume our vegetables, build nests in our buildings, or just plain hang around and leave their droppings behind, like starlings and pigeons. Overall, they provide a greater benefit than detriment to us home gardeners. So, who are these good guys and how can you attract them to your garden?

If you watch the birds in your garden, you'll soon see that different birds find insects in various ways. Some, like American robins and grackles, will patrol your lawn, stalking about, searching for crawling bugs and worms. Others, like flycatchers, bluebirds and jays will sit perched on a branch or telephone wire waiting for their dinner to buzz by. Brown creepers will start at the base of trees and climb in a spiral upwards looking for bugs, while nuthatches work their way downwards. Woodpeckers and flickers make holes into the trunks of trees, finding and devouring bugs with their long tongues. Some birds, like towhees will scurry among the leaves, pushing the fallen leaves aside, looking for the bugs that are hiding beneath.

They come in all kinds of sizes and colors, and with a bit of practice, many are easy to recognize. Some of the best insectivores in our area are small or have inconspicuous coloring so that you may not even see them unless you really look for them. Chickadees, phoebes, warblers and wrens are voracious eaters and a benefit to the gardener.



If you were a chickadee, more than 90 percent of your diet would be insects.

You would be munching on aphids, beetles, caterpillars, flies, leafhoppers, moths, scale, tree hoppers, true bugs and weevils. These diminutive foragers snatch up many of the smaller bugs, eggs and larvae that bigger birds miss. In winter, chickadees will search crevices of tree trunks for insects and eggs. **Chestnut-backed chickadees** (*Poecile rufescens*) are approximately 5 inches long with black and white bold markings on the head and a rich chestnut-brown back.

You may have heard a phoebe before ever seeing one. Their easily recognizable "fee-bee" song is common during the spring and summer. **Black phoebes** (*Sayornis nigricans*) belong to the family of tyrant flycatchers, *Tyrannidae*, and are stealthy hunters – look for one perched on a rock or short fence poised to swoop down and catch their prey mid-flight. They eat many insect species, as well as other invertebrates and berries. They are less than 6 inches in length with a large triangular head, black except for a white belly and under tail coverts.

Perky little yellow warblers are known for their sweet songs, but are also big eaters – their diet is about 60 percent caterpillars. They also eat moths, mosquitoes, beetles and some berries. **Wilson's Warbler** (*Wilsonia pusilla*) is a common resident in Marin gardens, usually foraging within ten feet of the ground, darting after flying insects or hovering in mid-air to glean insects from leaves. They sometimes feed on the ground, probing the leaf litter for prey.



They're tiny (4 ½" - 5") with small bills and relatively long thin tails. With the exception of the males' shiny black cap, present to a variably lesser extent on the females, they lack obvious field marks. Forehead, face and under parts are lemon yellow, and upper parts are olive. The black eye stands out on the plain face.

Wrens are one of the best of the insect eaters. They search trees, shrubs and vines for caterpillars, grasshoppers, snails, beetles and millipedes. They're regular backyard visitors and aren't very fussy about nesting sites. You may find them in mailboxes, building crevices, even in pockets of hanging laundry.

Bewick's wren (*Thryomanes bewickii*) is a variety common on the Pacific coast. These small (5 inches) gray and brown songbirds have a thin, pointed bill useful for probing nooks and crannies. They tend to move around with their tails cocked skyward,

In order to attract these little eating machines to your garden, you need to provide some basic necessities – food, shelter and protection and water. Most of these are readily available; you may need only to enhance them. Tina Phillips, project leader of Cornell Lab of Ornithology's Bird House Network says "The most important thing to do to attract birds to your yard is to provide an enticing habitat, not just a nest box. Birds choose a nest site based on its surrounding habitat." Birds, like humans, visualize the environment primarily through sight and sound. It is best to design a site with multiple attractions--food, cover, climate modification, perching sites, and water.

Design a garden that provides year-round food. In spring and summer, there should be plenty of insects available, but during the cooler times of the year, you may want to supplement the food supply with feeders filled with sunflower seeds, thistle, and other seeds.

Birds prefer landscapes that have "edges" or spaces where trees and shrubs border open spaces. Many birds like to feed in open areas but need protective cover to roost, nest, and raise their young. A thorny shrub like a rose provides not only perches but protection from predators. A few different nesting sites like brush piles, ledges, nest boxes, shrubs and various types of trees, including dead tree limbs and trunks, provide nesting areas and are a great food source for insectivores. They also need shade and protection against rain and wind.

A water supply not only quenches a bird's thirst, but also gives them a place where they can dip into a refreshing bath. Any shallow, waterproof pan, garbage can lid or large plant saucer placed on a flat rock or log stump can serve as a birdbath. You may want to leave some areas unplanted to allow the birds to create an area for dust baths.

A cautionary note; many herbicides, insecticides and fertilizers are deadly poisons. If you use any of these, read the label carefully to determine the risk to birds and other wildlife. Also, millions of backyard birds and other animals are slaughtered by cats each year. Cats are a serious threat to fledglings, birds roosting at night and birds while they're on the nest, at the feeder and using a bird bath. Carefully consider where you place water or supplemental food sources if you have cats.

Photos of Wilson's warbler and black phoebe courtesy of CalPhoto