



# Helping Birds at Home: Improving Bird Habitat in Your Yard

The songbird breeding season - mid-March through August - is a critical time for both resident and migratory birds in California. Loss of suitable breeding habitat and degradation of existing habitat, including the spread of exotic non-native species, are main contributors to bird population declines in California. While many of us enjoy watching birds visit our feeders and constructed nest boxes, we encourage you to help birds on your land by providing native habitat and breeding grounds.

## *Is your yard attractive from a bird's eyes?*

There are many steps that can be taken to improve your yard for bird productivity. By providing habitat — especially natural nest sites and foraging areas — you can play an important role in ensuring healthy bird population for the future. Below are several helpful tips for improving bird habitat in your yard.

## Provide Nesting Sites

**Native vegetation** provides the best protection for breeding birds. **Planting a variety of native shrubs and trees** in multi-species clumps provides the most nest sites with the best cover.

- **Choose Native Plants**

Find out what habitat type is natural to your area and then choose native plant species that naturally belong there. Keep in mind the characteristics of your land. Note slope, moisture and type of soil, and the presence or absence of a natural water source, so that your yard's plant community is sustainable. For information on California's native plants, visit the California Native Plant Society at [www.cnps.org](http://www.cnps.org) or see the Creating Backyard Habitat section of PRBO's website at <http://www.prbo.org/birdinfo>

- **Structural Diversity**

A structurally diverse habitat is one that has plants growing at different heights and different assemblages. This provides birds with many places to build nests and find food. It also provides adult and young birds with excellent concealment from predators.

- **Plantings that Mimic Natural Configurations**

Planting native species in a mosaic design - where species are overlapped and grown in clumps - mimics natural plant communities and, therefore, provides good nesting habitat for birds. This offers more choices for birds to build nests, find food, while offering sufficient cover for birds traveling to and from nests.

- **Leave Dead Trees or Dead Limbs**

This provides habitat for cavity (tree hole) nesting species such as woodpeckers, bluebirds, nuthatches, chickadees, American Kestrel, and Oak Titmouse. Overall, natural cavities provide better nest sites than bird boxes.

- **Leave Brush Piles and Grass Clippings**

Brush and grass piles provide shelter, nesting material, foraging grounds, and even nesting sites for birds.

## Birds nest from ground to tree top



Of greatest importance in most regions of California is the understory of shrubs and herbaceous plants. This feature is often conspicuously missing from our backyards, local parks, and businesses.

## Reduce Predators

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The most common neighborhood predator is the domestic cat. Researchers estimate that over *100 million birds are killed daily by domestic cats in the United States*. Native predators, such as raccoons, skunks, rats, and jays, can also negatively impact birds. Human activities are responsible for sustaining higher than natural numbers of these predators which negatively affect nesting songbirds. You can help with these simple actions:

- **Eliminate outdoor sources of food** such as pet food dishes, compost piles, uncovered garbage cans
- **Cover compost piles** or use covered worm bins
- Use **bird feeders that exclude jays and squirrels**. Many of these types of feeders can be found at wildlife stores.
- **Keep cats indoors!** Especially during the breeding season when vulnerable young birds are just out of the nest. Bells on collars are not enough. For more information see the Cats Indoors Program at [www.abcbirds.org/cats/catsindoors.htm](http://www.abcbirds.org/cats/catsindoors.htm).

## Mow Smart

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Many songbirds nest close to the ground in grasses and ‘weedy’ areas. Critical nesting habitat and even nests are often destroyed unknowingly through mowing and other routine yard maintenance.

- Set aside “**no-mow**” areas of your land, this will provide nest sites and shelter for several bird species, especially goldfinches, buntings, quail, and towhees.
- **Do not mow native tree saplings and shrubs**. Even poison oak, a native shrub, has high value for birds and other wildlife.

## Declare Your Land a Bird Sanctuary

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Designate areas of your land “bird-friendly” with these actions:

- **Minimize human disturbance** during the breeding season (mid-March through August). Some common disturbances may include, vegetation clearing, construction, spraying, and pet activity.
- **Create networks of suitable habitat**. Connecting habitat patches is valuable to birds and other wildlife. Work with neighbors and local conservancies to create a network of “bird sanctuaries” in your community.

## Learn the Birds on Your Land

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- **Buy a field guide** and **binoculars!**
- **Take a workshop** or **join a bird walk** in your area.

### Did you know? ...

The National Wildlife Federation certifies backyards, schoolyards, and workplaces as “wildlife friendly” through their Backyard Wildlife Habitat Program. See Resources below for their website.

## Resources

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There are many resources available to help you with acquiring native plants as well as displaying your backyard to be bird and wildlife friendly.

- PRBO Conservation Science ♦ <http://www.prbo.org/birdinfo> ♦ (707) 781-2555
- California Native Plant Society ♦ [www.cnps.org](http://www.cnps.org)
- National Wildlife Federation Backyard Wildlife Habitat Program ♦ [www.nwf.org/backyard](http://www.nwf.org/backyard)
- National Audubon Society ♦ [www.audubon.org](http://www.audubon.org)
- Larner Seeds ♦ (415) 868-9407