

The Avian Food Pyramid and Your Garden *by Bob Swain*

Mutually Beneficial Considerations

Next to the presence of oxygen in our atmosphere, the ability of our environment to produce the food (energy) needed to support life is the most important process on Earth. Not only do we own that stewardship as a population, we own that as individual contributors.

The macro version of the food pyramid is little things being consumed for energy by larger things, with the larger things (sometimes smarter things) being towards the top of the pyramid. For the purpose of this article we will focus on our association with bird species and cap that pyramid at the level of the raptors (falcons, hawks, owls, eagles, vultures). Not everything is aligned perfectly in nature but generally effects and changes that occur towards the bottom of the ecology are felt elsewhere and influence subsequent behaviors and results. It's called the bottom-up effect within the food pyramid. Decaying matter supports insects, insects support songbird populations, songbirds and other small mammals are preyed upon by raptors. Less decaying matter over time = less insects = less songbirds and small mammals = less raptors.

So from a gardener's perspective, as an individual contributor to the biological community, you can adopt practices that strengthen our wild bird's food pyramid while at the same time maximizing the ecological benefits that birds return to you.

Birds eat bugs – lots of bugs. Many bugs eat at your flowers, shrubs, trees and crops. More birds around equals less bugs around, especially as high bug season aligns with high young raising season. Instead of the 2 mouths of parent birds, now there are 2 – 6 more mouths to fill with bugs. Some birds are nectar lovers (hummingbirds) and their visits to your flowers and fruit trees help bees with pollination duties. Fruit, nut and seed eating birds spread plant growth by seed dispersal. You may wonder where that plant popping up next Spring came from.

The avian food pyramid is stressed. Over time, through commercial and residential development, we have fragmented the natural environment into smaller and smaller habitat islands which challenge the abilities of animals of all types to do what they are designed to do -survive and reproduce. A bright spot here though is that within your sphere of influence (your garden, your city parks, your county open spaces), you can make a difference in our wild birds food pyramid that can have mutually beneficial results.

Brush piles. Dedicate a never used corner of your back yard or side yard and leave it alone. It provides needed cover for both predator and prey. If it gets too messy, separate it out in spring and leave it exposed for a week so the hunters can hunt. Then recycle and start another pile with spring cleanup and summer pruning.

Plant trees and shrubs. The more native, the more flowering and the more that produce a fruit the better. Birds use these

areas for roosting, nesting and as a base of operations as they forage top to bottom in your garden areas for bugs. Giving wild birds in your area a reason to spend more time in your yard can have positive results like eliminating dangerous and costly pesticides.

As fall comes and these leaves start to cover the ground, don't cleanse the area completely. Leaf piles and leaf layers as mulch will decompose and as they do they generate heat and can stay viable throughout winter. The birds will find anything living in there.

Early flowering plants are good for emerging bees and overwintering hummingbirds. Check which plants work best in the microclimates where you live.

If you have a property where there is a fence line or open area you can leave uncut, do so. Plant seed bearing plants like thistle, black eyed susan, coneflower and sunflower around the edges and let the grass grow and develop seed heads. Leave up through the winter. Though all wild birds will eat bugs to get needed protein, there are many that are seed specialists (sparrows, finches) and we want their contributions as well.

If you don't have a naturally occurring water source on your property - add one. Moving water attracts birds and encourages them to spend more time working for you. A dead tree, as long as it is not dangerous, is a **wildlife tree** providing opportunities for feeding and nesting. With all the deforestation we have done, there are less primary nesting locations (safety, food, shelter) for songbirds and owls. If you have a good location, **adding nesting boxes** is a simple way to increase the amount of bug hunting that happens in your gardens.

These are simple things that all of us can do to make small contributions to the health of this bottom up food pyramid. The wild birds in the best condition (health, foraging success, display) and with the best nesting locations (safe, sound, reliable food source) have the best breeding success. Many of the birds we see in our yards and open spaces in our prime growing season from May to September are migrants from South America, Central America and Mexico. They fly all the way up here for two main reasons. 1. Emerging insects have the high protein needed to breed and raise their young. 2. The longer daylight hours the northern latitudes allow more time to do guess what...catch insects!

With our individual contributions to enhance the bottom of the food pyramid and reap the benefits of natural pest control, we become part of a collective effort supporting wild bird populations that is necessary to maintain and enhance biodiversity for future generations. So the next time you see a Spotted Towhee, Bewick's Wren, Fox Sparrow or hear the "witchity-witchity-witchity" of the Common Yellowthroat, send them a solid "thanks" for the work they do controlling the insect population in your neighborhood.

Gate Opens for Spring

If you are one who recognizes great organizations when you see them, then you know that two of them are near each other on Lea Hill in Auburn. Naturally, when Soos Creek Botanical Garden (SCBG) needed a gate to span their large entry, they should turn to their neighbors at the Green River College (GRC) Welding Technologies program.

“Not a standard rail-style gate,” said SCBG Director Jim Daly. “This gate should be unique, and be what ‘represents’ us. We are a 23 acre botanical garden of unique trees, plants and more.”

“We have many resourceful volunteers within SCBG,” Daly added. “We designed and built our own entrance sign out by the road, so when we found we needed an entrance gate, Adele Bockelman sketched a design of horizontal branches to span the 27-foot entry: two panels, with vines woven through. But we knew it would take more than just our skills to create it, so we turned to our talented neighbors at GRC, who have the knowledge and skills needed.”

“That’s when I got excited about their project,” GRC welding artist Greg Bartol said. “It will take 200 feet of welding, but the gate can be made in 1/2-round relief.”

When the first panel of the gate was assembled at GRC, Auburn Valley Creative Arts (AVCA) artist Wendy Ray painted it, getting her inspiration from Paul Cezanne’s ‘Pine Tree Near Aix.’

“The initial sketch was ours, but Greg had a free hand to refine the final design. It turned out great. We can’t thank him and Wendy enough,” said Daly.

“It’s great,” neighbor Jim Franklin said, “I’ve got a beautiful garden *and* a very interesting gate in my neighborhood!”

by James Daly and Greg Bartol



Soos Creek Botanical Garden opens the gate for the season on Wednesday, March 6th, 2024. Open hours are from 10am until 4pm, Wednesday through Saturday.



SCBG Rain Garden, Winter 2023

Tired of the Winter Blues Already?

by Jo Schumacher

It’s only December and I’m already looking forward to my spring bulbs poking their heads up through the mulch. I’m ready for color and the anticipation of those tiny leaf buds magically appearing on dead-looking branches, for spring cleaning my raised beds to plant spring crops, for longer days! What are you looking forward to in spring 2024?

While we all wait for springtime, take a look through your windows to see what winter beauty and color sit in your yard. When I take the time to really look in my yard, I start to see a lot of color, shapes, wildlife and potential that I’d otherwise overlook. What do you see in your yard? In the forest? Local parks?

Last year at our two plant sales, we put up a white board for you, our wonderful customers to suggest plants you’d like to see at our sales: from our Garden? Something unusual? Something we haven’t had in a while and you’d like to see again? We took your suggestions to heart and are working to make some of your ideas happen at our future sales!

We look forward to seeing you, talking about plants, and sharing stories of your gardening experiences at our plant sale on April 26th and 27th .

Plan ahead to attend our

SPRING PLANT SALE

APRIL 26 & 27, 2024

Friday and Saturday 10:00am - 4:00pm

Spring 2024 Pavilion Programs by the Pond



Pavilion Programs are on the third Wednesday of the month, 12:30pm to 2pm. No charge, but donations gladly accepted.

The Pavilion provides covered outdoor seating.

April 17th

Growing Specialty Iris and Peonies with Patrick Spence

May 15th

Crows with Connie Sidles

My Favorite Gardening Podcasts

Katie Swickard

When I'm yearning to be gardening but the rain, snow and winds of winter are howling, a good gardening podcast gets me right side up. Household chores are easier while listening to a good podcast. On clear crisp winter days I like to put on my favorite bone conduction headphones (no dangling cords to get in the way!) and head out for a brisk walk while listening to fascinating garden topics. Here are a few of my favorites that are based on science-backed gardening facts.

The Joe Gardener Show - Joe Lamp'l, guides you through each episode with practical tips and information to help you become a better, smarter gardener, no matter where you are on your journey. This series has a strong emphasis on organic gardening and growing food, but covers a diverse range of topics from one of the country's most informed and leading gardening personalities today. <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-joe-gardener-show-organic-gardening-vegetable/id1245331505>

Margaret Roach - A Way to Garden - Margaret is a garden columnist for 'The New York Times' and has been a leading garden writer for 30 years—at 'Martha Stewart Living,' 'Newsday,' and in three books. The podcast has won three silver medals from the Garden Writers Association of America. <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/margaret-roach-a-way-to-garden/id370801678>

Growing Greener with Tom Christopher - Tom's half-hour program covers environmentally informed gardening. He hosts different experts who are leading voices on gardening in partnership with nature. His goal is to make your landscape healthier, more beautiful, more sustainable, and more fun. <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/growing-greener/id1484694580>

Gardener Tip of the Week - This show covers sustainable living, vegetable gardening, seasonal, organic, and fun advice for urban farming and gardening served with a sense of humor.

<https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/gardener-tip-of-the-week/id275458204>

The Rainier Audubon Society visits Soos Creek Botanical Garden

The Garden is excited to be a part of the 124th annual Christmas Bird Count on Saturday, December 30, 2023. Field leaders will be taking teams out in the field. The Christmas Bird Count (CBC) is an annual survey that began in the early 1900s.

To find out what conservationists have learned through Christmas Bird Count data, check out their website. rainieraudubon.org

You can even participate in the CBC Backyard Bird Watch.

Join the CBC by counting birds on your own in your yard. You can choose what time of day you would like to do your survey—morning, afternoon or even nighttime.

How to participate in the CBC Yard Survey

If you live in the Rainier Audubon CBC Circle, you can count birds at home for the CBC. Your data will be submitted to the National Audubon. If you live outside of the Rainier Audubon CBC Circle, you can still conduct a survey and they will add your information to their Rainier Audubon CBC files. The data will not be submitted to National Audubon because your survey location is outside of the count circle. If you visit their website you can determine if you live within the circle or outside.

What a fun winter project to share with the kids or the grandkids! Just download the forms to keep track of what you see.

Download RAS [Backyard Bird Checklist](#)

Download [RAS Winter Birds](#)



Winter is when spring is almost in our reach. *Marianne Binetti*

No winter lasts forever; no spring skips its turn. *Hal Borland*

The flowers of late winter and early spring occupy places in our hearts well out of proportion to their size.

Gertrude S. Wister



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