

# 2 Home Improvement for Wildlife: *Making Your Woods Attractive to Wildlife*

There are many things you can do to attract wildlife to your property.

How much time and effort you want to spend is entirely up to you.

On a small scale, you can put up a bird feeder and a bird bath in places most suitable to attract a variety of birds. On a larger scale, you can improve living conditions for many types of wildlife. In fact, small landowners like yourself are essential to wildlife. You have many options. Here are a few:

- ❖ Plant flowering dogwoods and shadbush to provide food for over twenty species of songbirds.
- ❖ Encourage the growth of white pines, hemlocks and other conifers that provide important food for wintering birds like chickadees, pine siskins, and small mammals like red squirrels and voles.
- ❖ Clear a patch in your woodland for migratory songbirds, deer, ruffed grouse, woodcock and other species that benefit from the vigorous tree growth that occurs after space is opened up.
- ❖ Create a snag, or a standing dead tree, for the many species of wildlife that use them.
- ❖ Create brush piles that wild turkeys, rabbits, hare, and small mammals use for nesting and hiding.
- ❖ Dig a small pond or pool so wildlife have an accessible water source.

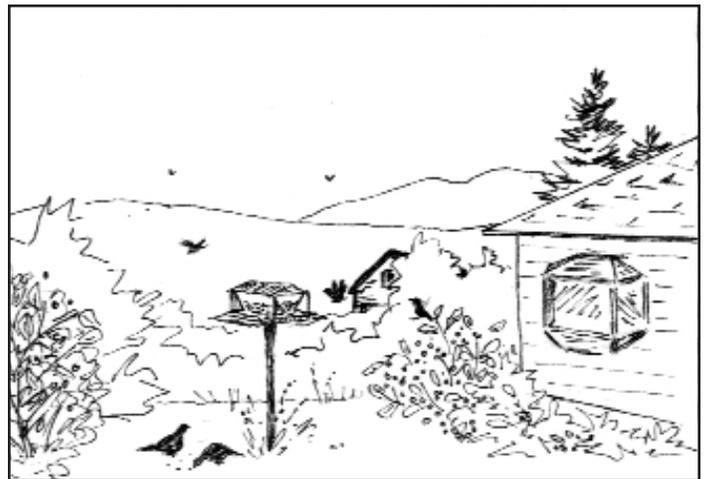
## Habitat: Where Wildlife Live and Work

Wildlife need the same basic things we do. Just like we need food and water, a

house to live in, and space to stretch out and move around in, wildlife need (1) food, (2) water, (3) cover, and (4) space. These four components make up the **habitat**, or living requirements, of each species.

Some background in what wildlife need

## *Habitat Components*



*Food*



*Space*

will help you plan habitat home improvements that really work on your property.

**Food** needs vary from one species of wildlife to another. Some birds eat only certain types of seeds, for example, while others eat only insects.

**Water** availability is crucial. A water source as simple as a birdbath or a large bowl can attract a variety of animals.

**Cover** is the place where animals can rest safely in much the same way we do when we lock the door to our house and go to bed. Cover may be a den in a rocky hillside for a red fox, whereas snowshoe hares

hide beneath the sheltering branches of evergreen trees and wood frogs find shelter beneath dead leaves on the forest floor.

**Space** is the entire area, or territory, that each animal needs to find food, water, and cover. It's easy for us; food is in the refrigerator, water comes out of the tap, and our bedroom is down the hall. But just imagine how large our habitat would need to be if we were settlers to a wild country and had to haul our water from a stream, hunt for meat, and gather berries and nuts. We would need to roam a bit to make our living — how far would depend on the seasonal availability of food and shelter.

This is exactly what wildlife do. How much they roam depends on what they eat, how much water they need, how much cover is available, and how much room they need to do their daily jobs of avoiding predators, eating, courting, and raising a family. A gray squirrel needs a couple of acres of mixed hardwoods. A ruffed grouse needs forty acres. Neither can live in a mature spruce and balsam fir forest. Some songbirds need only a small space right around their nest during breeding season if food and water are nearby. Others defend 200 acres of woods during the breeding season and will not raise a family without it.

During breeding season, wildlife may also have special nesting or denning habitats that provide extra protection for their young. This may be a nest in a tree, thick brush in a damp area, or many other places they don't use at other times of the year.

### Some Woodland Features That Are Important to a Variety of Wildlife

Your lawn is a clearing in the forest. If you quit mowing, trees will probably grow back in and create or increase the shrubby edge between your woods and your lawn. An **edge** is any place where two different natural areas meet. Whether it is a high tide zone and the adjacent shore, a field edge where it meets the woods, or a stream and



*Water*



*Cover*



*A Wildlife Safari - Can you find signs of wildlife habitat in this scene?  
Hint - use your safari checklist*

stream bank, edges are usually home to many species of plants and animals. Brushy edges between woods and fields tend to have excellent cover and food for birds, small mammals, deer and other medium sized mammals.

The damp edges of pools, marshes, and creeks are home to plants and animals that cannot live elsewhere. In fact, the **riparian** area, typically a 300 foot wide zone where woods meet streams and lakes, is important to more kinds of wildlife than any other habitat type in the state. Many breeding and nesting song birds, marsh birds, and ducks rely on riparian areas, while other wildlife use the cover provided by riparian areas to travel across otherwise open fields from one set of woods to another. With a little planning, it is easy to increase or protect the edge area on your property.

**Mast** trees and shrubs are those that produce fruit, nuts, or seeds eaten by wildlife. Oak, beech, pin cherry, wild apple, shad bush, winter berry, hawthorn, and dogwood are examples of valuable mast species. Some wildlife, like wild turkeys and black bears, rely on mast for a large part of their diets. It's possible to encourage mast species to produce more food with proper pruning and by thinning out adjacent trees and shrubs. The edge border is often a good place to concentrate your efforts.

**Snags**, or dead standing trees, provide homes for 58 species of wildlife in Maine. Woodpeckers, chickadees, and other birds pick insects off the decaying bark and some birds and owls use the same snag as a nesting site year after year. Hawks use them for hunting viewpoints and moles burrow beneath their roots. As snags decay, they

add nutrients to the soil and encourage new plants and trees to grow. Considering leaving snags in your woods if they aren't a safety hazard, or creating some away from trails if you don't already have standing dead trees on the property.

Do you have dead, downed logs in your woods? Are new seedlings growing out of the nutrient rich decaying wood? These logs provide hiding and denning places for small mammals and drumming stations for courting ruffed grouse. Over time, they also break down and add nutrients to the soil.

Different soil types are also important to wildlife habitat because they influence what kinds of trees and plants will grow in your woods. If your woods are on a dry south facing slope, it may be hard to encourage thick, lush vegetation to grow. If the soils are wet throughout the summer, the area will favor tree species that are tolerant of wetter soils such as black spruce, tamarack and red maple. This, in turn, affects what kinds of wildlife will live there.

A unique feature in New England woodlands are small, temporary wet areas known as **vernal pools**. Woodland vernal pools are created by melting snow and rain in the spring and often dry up by late summer and fall. They are important breeding and living habitats for spotted salamanders, blue spotted salamanders, wood frogs, and fairy shrimp. Considered living laboratories by wetlands ecologists, they are also studied for their significance to woodlands as a whole.

### **Improving Wildlife Habitat on Your Property**

Don't confuse feeding wildlife with

wildlife habitat improvement. Artificially feeding wildlife can cause more harm than good since animals easily become dependent on concentrated and artificial food sources. Diseases can also spread rapidly at feeding stations — sometimes to humans. Even bird feeders help most if they supplement, rather than replace, naturally grown food.

Improving wildlife habitat allows wildlife to get what they need when they need it. Even if you still feed birds, for instance, a widespread variety of mast trees

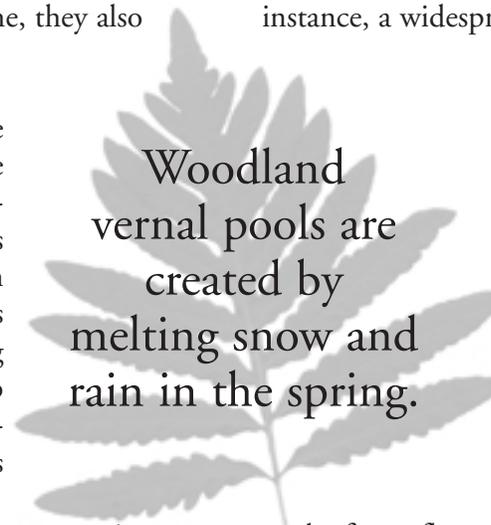
and plants reduce the stiff competition at the feeder where less aggressive birds often lose out in the fight for food.

There is no single recipe for improving wildlife habitat. If, for instance, you own a few acres of mixed hardwoods with a closed canopy that doesn't allow much sunlight through

to the forest floor, and your property is adjacent to 20 acres of the same kind of woodland, then your woods would provide excellent habitat for the scarlet tanager and hermit thrush, song birds whose world populations are declining due to habitat loss. Since these species need large areas of closed canopy hardwood forest during the breeding season, the choices you make could provide crucial habitat. In another woodland, however, cutting some trees to increase edge habitat would be much more useful than leaving the woods alone.

You probably won't be able to provide all the habitat needs for a wide variety of wildlife on less than ten acres, but you will probably be able to provide one or more essential habitat requirements.

Perhaps your neighbors can fill the gap if they have a water source and you don't. You can still develop essential cover for





*Whitetail deer like a combination of woods, fields and edge areas.*

many species that visit your neighbors for a drink. Better yet, let your neighbors in on your plans and see if they are interested in a joint effort. If you get them interested in improving wildlife habitat, your combined efforts will likely have an even bigger impact — particularly for species that need more than ten acres to survive. Be sure to request permission from your neighbors to go beyond your own property boundaries into their backyards and woods.

Many resources and publications are available to help guide you in identifying and improving wildlife habitat. If you keep notes of what you see in the woods, you'll have a good starting point for planning wildlife home improvements.

### **Family Pets and Wildlife**

Habitat improvements will be much more successful if household pets are kept under control. Even the sweetest and laziest family pets have devastating impacts on wildlife, especially during the nesting season. Millions of nesting birds are killed by household pets each year. Ground nesting birds are particularly vulnerable. Keeping your dogs from roaming in the woods and your cats inside from May through late July

is the single best thing you can do for wildlife in your area. Attaching bells to your pet's collar doesn't help at all.

Cats, small dogs, and other small pets are just also just another link in the food chain when they step outside the door. Larger animals like hawks, owls, coyotes, and bobcats see them as prey. Smaller animals like baby birds, rabbits, flying squirrels, and chipmunks see them as predators.

### **A Wildlife Sanctuary in Your Yard**

Just think, a year or two from now you could have orioles in your backyard and migratory songbirds singing in the shrubby edge of the woods. Perhaps you'll be able to entice a large Piliated woodpecker to a newly created snag, and rabbits or snowshoe hare to brushy woodpiles. The actions you take may even provide crucial habitat for wildlife species that are having harder and harder times finding places to live and work.

Before long, your neighbors will be turning to you to ask how they can attract wildlife to their own backyards and woods. Make sure you give them some tips! Wildlife need property owners with less than ten acres.



*Wild turkeys need open understory beneath hardwood trees.*

## RESOURCES

### Birds

*Action in Your Yard for Migratory Bird Conservation.* Cornell Laboratory. To order: Cornell Lab of Ornithology, 159 Sapsucker Woods Rd., Ithaca, NY 14850 or 607-254-2440.

Coleman, John S., et al. 1997. *Cats and Wildlife, A Conservation Dilemma.* University of Wisconsin Cooperative Extension. Contact: Cooperative Extension Publications, Room 170, 630 W. Mifflin St., Madison, WI 53703 or 608-262-3346. Internet site at <http://www.wisc.edu/wildlife/e-pubs.html>

Coverstone, Nancy. 1998. *Keeping Your Yard Safe for Birds.* University of Maine Cooperative Extension. Facts on bird diseases and how to prevent them through maintenance of bird baths and feeders. Free. University of Maine Cooperative Extension. Bulletin Series # 7146. To order: 800-287-0274.

Elliott, Catherine A. 1996. *Bird Feeding Basics.* University of Maine Cooperative Extension. Information Bulletin #7124. Describes types of feeders, food and favorites. To order: 800-287-0274.

Elliott, Catherine A. 1997. *Birdhouse Basics.* University of Maine Cooperative Extension. Information Bulletin #7117. Gives general guidelines for birdhouses, including dimensions and species. To order: 800-287-0274.

Massachusetts Audubon Society. *A Guide to Backyard Birds of Eastern North America.* All weather laminated fold-out guide to 50 birds most often seen in backyards and towns. Convenient introduction to the birds for all ages. Waterproof. \$3.95. Available from Acorn Naturalists (#BIRD-5233). To order: 800-422-8886 or the Internet at <http://www.acornnaturalists.com>

### Identifying Wildlife and Wildlife Habitat

Allan, David N. 1996. *Knowing Your Woods: Wildlife Habitat and Tree Species.* Acquaints landowners with their woodlands, the wildlife that is on them and benefits offered. Includes a list of tree species and their uses. University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension. Forest Fact Sheet 18. For a catalog, contact: Information Services and Publications, UNH Cooperative Extension, Taylor Hall-University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH 03824.

Borns, Boring, and Dendy. *Fun With Nature: Take Along Guide.* Helps children identify over 150 plants and animals, including caterpillars, insects, butterflies, frogs, toads, turtles and salamanders and the clues (tracks and scat) that they leave behind. Perfect to take outside as a field guide. \$12.70. Available from Acorn Naturalists (#PRE-741). To order: 800-422-8886 or the Internet at <http://www.acornnaturalists.com>

National Geographic. *The Curious Naturalist: A Guide to Understanding and Exploring Nature.* Tours nine ecosystems including backyards and woodlands. Features habitat descriptions, species identification, and unique field projects. Lavishly illustrated with photographs. For ages 10-adult. \$23.95. Available from Acorn Naturalists (#EE-7080). To order: 800-422-8886 or the Internet at <http://www.acornnaturalists.com>

Nail. *Whose Tracks are These? A Clue Book of Familiar Forest Animals.* A look at the woodland community for ages 4-8. \$11.95. Available from Acorn Naturalists (#PRE-1818). To order: 800-422-8886 or the Internet at <http://www.acornnaturalists.com>

### Backyard Habitat Management

*Backyard Conservation: Bringing Conservation From the Countryside to Your Backyard.* April, 1998. Lists activities for improving and conserving your backyard for the environment and wildlife. Lists organizations, landscapers and garden clubs in the back. Natural Resources

Conservation Service. USDA. Internet site at <http://nrcs.usda.gov>

*Beneficial Insects in Your Backyard*. Describes common insects used to manage garden pests and how to get them. Free. University of Maine Cooperative Extension. Bulletin # 2490. To order: 800-287-0274 or the Internet at <http://www.umext.maine.edu>

Coverstone, Nancy. 1998. *Habitats: A Fact Sheet Series on Managing Lands for Wildlife*. Essential material for those who want to create, enhance or manage backyard wildlife habitat in Maine. Includes Information on planning wildlife habitat improvements on your own property. Free. University of Maine Cooperative Extension. Bulletin Series # 7146. To order: 800-287-0274 or the Internet at <http://www.umext.maine.edu>

Elliott, Catherine A. *Plantings for Wildlife in Maine*. University of Maine Cooperative Extension. To order: 800-287-0274.

*Enhancing Wildlife Habitats: A Practical Guide for Forest Landowners*. University of Maine Cooperative Extension. Includes chapters on basic forest wildlife ecology, understanding wildlife habitats, woodcock, grouse, deer, wild turkey, upland forest animals and wetlands. Illustrated. 172 pp. Bulletin #7120. \$24.00. To order: 800-287-0274 or the Internet at <http://www.umext.maine.edu>

*A Forester's Guide to Managing Wildlife Habitats in Maine*. A useful guide for landowners and foresters interested in managing for wildlife habitat on larger properties also managed for timber. University of Maine Cooperative Extension. 46 pp. Bulletin #7000. \$14.00. To order: 800-287-0274 or the Internet at <http://www.umext.maine.edu>

*Gardening to Conserve Maine's Native Landscape: Plants to Use and Plants to Avoid*. A comprehensive list of native flowering plants, trees, shrubs,

vines, and ferns recommended for landscaping, along with their requirements for moisture and shade. University of Maine Cooperative Extension. Bulletin # 2500. Free. To order: 800-287-0274 or the Internet at <http://www.umext.maine.edu>

*Landscaping For Wildlife*. Maine Audubon Society. Contact: Maine Audubon Society, 118 U.S. Route One, Falmouth, ME 04105 or 207-781-2330.

*Managing Woodlands For Wildlife: A Suggested Reading List*. 1997. Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife. Free. Contact: 207-287-8000.

*Wild Apple Trees for Wildlife*. University of Maine Cooperative Extension. Bulletin #7126. Free. To order: 800-287-0274 or the Internet at <http://www.umext.maine.edu>

Wyzaga, Marilyn. *Homes for Wildlife, A Planning Guide for Habitat Enhancement on School Grounds*. A resource for improving wildlife habitats with student plans, activities and worksheets. \$9.95. #B-5668. To order: 800-422-8886 or the Internet at <http://www.acorn-group.com>

### **Problems with Wildlife**

*Beavers and Their Control*. University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension. Wildlife Fact Sheet 10. Contact: Information Services and Publications, UNH Cooperative Extension, Taylor Hall- University of New Hampshire, Durham, NH 03824.

*Rabies*. 1996. University of Maine Cooperative Extension. Free. To order: 800-287-0274. For more information on human and animal exposure questions call 207-287-2727.

### A Wildlife Safari In Your Woods

It's easy to go on safari out your back door. You have a head start if you already did a basic inventory of your property in *Backyard Family Project #1: Scouting Your Land*. If you haven't scouted your land, take a walk out in your woods to see what you can find. Look for tracks and droppings. Are you in hardwoods or conifers when you find them? Do you see possible denning sites or faint game trails nearby? Is there brushy vegetation on your property or a snag tree? How much edge habitat do you have? Do you have a water source on your property? In winter, look to see where birds nested the previous year. Where do you find the nests? Might the birds come back next spring?

If you take the safari checklist and a map of your property in the woods and mark what you find on the map as you go, you'll end up with a useful planning document for wildlife habitat improvement later on.

#### GETTING READY

1. Your safari team will need to read in *The Woods In Your Backyard: Home Improvement for Wildlife*, or you will need to explain the concepts to them. Also review *Backyard Family Project #1: Scouting Your Land* for safety guidelines.
2. If there is more than one team, decide where teams will begin and end in advance. Before you go, be sure everyone knows how to find their way back to a common meeting place in a certain time frame, and that there is a set plan for what to do if you or your group becomes disoriented.

#### TOOLS

##### You will need:

- ☛ Copies of the Safari Checklist for all group members.
- ☛ Copies of the map you created in *Backyard Family Project #1: Scouting Your Land*. (This activity can be done without a map, but it's more fun and effective if you have one).
- ☛ Pencils with erasers.

##### Optional:

- ☛ Colored flagging tape. (If you used colored flagging to mark your property boundaries, be sure you use a different color so you don't get confused next time you're in the woods. The tape is useful for flagging mast trees, snags, a tree near a water source, or other habitat features. These markers can be used for planning a nature trail or planning to improve or save wildlife habitat features that are already there. Flagging is available at hardware stores).
- ☛ Whistles on strings. (This is an excellent way to keep team members from getting lost. See *Backyard Family Project #1: Scouting Your Land* on how to effectively use this simple safety device).
- ☛ Clipboards make drawing on the map much easier.

## DOING THE ACTIVITY

**Time Frame: 1 to 2 hours.** Time varies depending on the size of the woods and how many stops are made. Count an extra half hour for different teams to put their information on a Master Map.

1. You'll probably need an activity leader for this to work as a group effort. Choose an activity leader who will go through the following steps with everybody else.
2. Verbally review terms on the Safari Checklist and their definitions. Definitions can be found in the glossary of *The Woods In Your Backyard*.
3. Review safety aloud.
4. It is best to leave all items in the woods where you find them for now. Later, you may want to collect leaves, twigs, or other signs for identification.
5. Check off each item on the Safari Check List as you find it. You may not find them all. If you find something that isn't on the list, write it in.
6. If a map is used, mark the location of the item on the appropriate place on the map.
7. Draw in trails, streams, wet areas, thick vegetation, and any other wildlife habitat features on the map.

**Note:** If you or your team follow the same compass lines and numbered checkpoints that you walked in *Backyard Family Project #1: Scouting Your Land*, you have an advantage. Any wildlife sign that you cross can be drawn onto the map and easily found again, since you are following a compass bearing.

### For example:

If you already scouted a line through the woods, re-walk that line with a photocopy of the map you created. When you see wildlife signs or habitat features, draw them in and make notes on the map.

If you notice a small trail that crosses the line between checkpoints 3 and 4 on the map, for instance, draw it on the map between the two points.

Since it is hard to see everything on one walk through the woods, add more details to the map as you find them on future walks. The more time you spend in the woods in your backyard, the more you'll see. The result will be a map full of information that will help you figure out the best way to do some home improvement for wildlife later on.

## SAFARI CHECK LIST

- Seed Mast Tree
- Fruit Mast Tree
- Snag
- Browse (*where animals have bitten the buds off the ends of twigs*)
- Game Trail
- Scat, or Animal Droppings
- Den Site
- Nest
- Field/Woodland Edge
- Woodland Edge
- Riparian Area
- Running Water
- Stagnant Water
- Brush Pile
- Wildlife "Voices" (*birds singing, frogs croaking*)
- Small Mammals like Squirrels, Chipmunks, and Voles
- Midden (*pile of spruce cone scales left by red squirrels*)
- Salamander
- Frog
- Vernal Pool (*area that is wet part of the year*)
- Burrows for Small Mammals
- Aquatic Insects
- Flying Insects
- Terrestrial Insects
- Wildlife Tracks in the Mud or Snow
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## RELATED ACTIVITIES

### **Wildlife Journal**

Keep a small notebook near your favorite window so you can jot down sightings of birds and other animals. It's a fun way to learn your wildlife neighbors. Do they come from the edge of the woods or from your neighbor's property? Are they eating berries from a bush or knocking on a tree? Are they around for a few days and then gone? Their behavior will give you some idea of their habitat needs even if you don't know specifically what they are eating or where they go for cover.

Another option is to hang a month-to-month wall calendar and scribble in your daily observations in the block for that day. This is an easy way to compare what you see as the seasons change.

### **Adopt a Special Place**

Adopt a special place on the property and check on it from season to season and year to year to see how it changes. This could be a mossy stone with ferns, a snag, a seedling, a vernal pool, or any number of woodland features.

### **Class Adaptation**

Adapt the Wildlife Safari for use by classes or youth groups. After the Safari, assign students to research one item on the list and contribute an entry to a written and illustrated nature guide to the woods.

