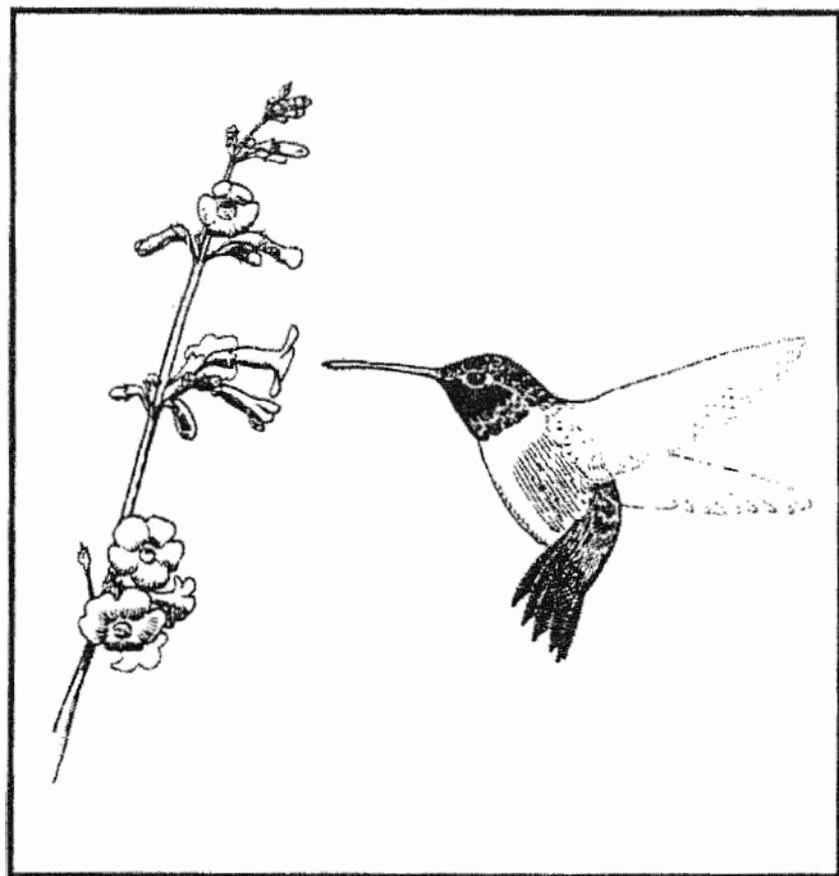


Attracting Birds to Your Backyard



Backyard Bird Garden at the Tucson Botanical Gardens

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Illustrations by Kenn Kaufman

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Humans are not the only residents of Tucson. Many birds live here as well, even in the middle of town, brightening the city with their colors and songs. With just a little effort, we can make our yards and gardens more attractive to the birds. The Backyard Bird Garden at TBG is designed to demonstrate some of the possibilities.

The basic requirements of birdlife

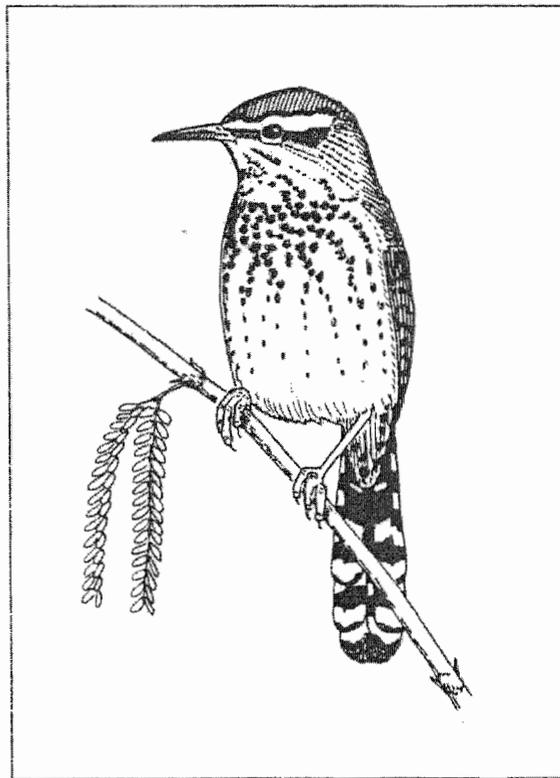
What do birds need for survival? The precise answer would depend on the particular species of bird involved; but in a general way, all birds need food, water, and shelter. This basic formula will help in decisions about what to plant in a bird garden. The most strategic choices will be native plants that provide both natural shelter and some kind of bird food.

Making an existing garden more attractive to birds

To create a successful bird garden, it is not necessary to pull out all existing plants and start over. Within the site chosen for our Backyard Bird Garden there were several non-native trees which were not particularly useful for attracting birds in Tucson. Rather than remove these mature trees, we left them in place and planted around them. They provide a certain amount of cover and foliage while the new plants are still getting established, and they do not detract from the over-all value of the bird garden.

The value of native plants

In designing any kind of garden, you can hardly go wrong by putting in native species of plants. These are plants that are already adapted to our local climate, so they don't require intensive care or excessive watering. Native birds and insects are already adapted to these plants, and are attracted to them.



Putting up with insects

Many gardeners think of insects as the enemies of their plants, but this is a short-sighted view. Insects and plants have co-existed and evolved together for millennia. A healthy garden will have many insects: besides the butterflies, bees, and other pollinators at the flowers, there will be innumerable tiny insects feeding on the stems and leaves. These insects rarely do any permanent damage to the plants - and their numbers are kept in check partly by wild birds. Almost all of our song-birds eat insects at least part of the time. The use of pesticides in a garden probably will not get rid of all the insects, but it may get rid of the birds. No pesticides are used in the TBG Backyard Bird Garden.

Hummingbird flowers

We tend to appreciate flowers without stopping to think about why they exist. Most beautiful flowers have evolved to attract pollinators; creatures that come to feed on the sweet nectar, and inadvertently carry some pollen from one plant to another. Most of these pollinators are insects, but hummingbirds also play a role, especially in the Southwest.

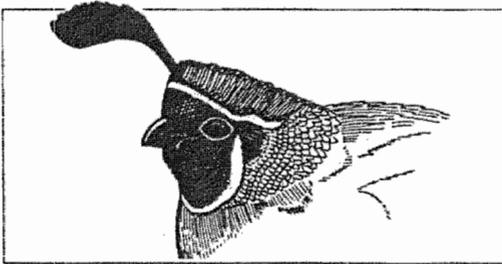
The flowers that have evolved to be pollinated by birds usually have a long tubular shape, and they are often some shade of red. Some of the popular hummingbird flowers in our Backyard Bird Garden fit that pattern, and some do not.

Classic hummingbird flowers here include ocotillo, betony, coral bells, justicia, zauschneria, and various kinds of penstemon. Some of the salvias are very popular with birds; *Salvia greggii* has the further advantage of blooming for most of the year in the Tucson climate. The yellow tubular blossoms of tree tobacco and tocoma are frequently visited by hummers. The blossoms of fairy duster have a very different structure, but they are popular also. Aloes and cape honeysuckle are pollinated by sunbirds in their native Africa, but in Arizona they attract hummingbirds.

With a selection of flowers that bloom at different seasons, one may host hummingbirds all year in Tucson; mostly Black-chinned Hummingbirds in summer and Anna's Hummingbirds in winter, with seasonal visits by Costa's, Broad-billed, Rufous, and other hummers. Other nectar feeders, such as Verdins and Hooded Orioles, may also make the rounds of the flowers.

Plants for berry-eating birds

Many birds eat the berries or fruits of wild plants, thus helping to spread their seeds around. Curve-billed Thrashers, House Finches, and many others will visit the conspicuous ripe fruits of the prickly pear. Other fruits that are far less noticeable, like those of the wolfberry and desert hackberry, are also eaten by many birds. The showy berries of cotoneaster and pyracantha are favored by Mockingbirds and other species, especially in harsh weather when insects may be hard to find. A surprisingly good plant for attracting birds is the native mistletoe that grows on mesquite and palo verde; its berries are a staple food for Phainopeplas and others, and some birds will build their nests in its dense clumps. A small amount of mistletoe will not harm a tree, but it is a parasite that should not be allowed to spread unchecked.



Plants for seed-eating birds

Thick-billed birds, like finches and sparrows, consume many seeds; so do doves, quail, and various other birds. One good way to attract them is to put out birdseed. But a more natural way is to put out the plants that produce favored seeds, and let the flower heads go to seed rather than trimming them back. Most native members of the composite family are good producers of birdseed. Plants like wild zinnia, desert marigold, brittlebush, and lemon marigold are all likely sources of food for House Finches, Inca Doves, White-crowned Sparrows, and others. The larger seeds of sunflowers attract Cardinals and Pyrrhuloxias. Thistles are not popular with most gardeners, but their seeds are popular with Lesser Gold Finches.

Not all of the good birdseed plants are in the composite family, however; the daleas in the Backyard Bird Garden are good examples.

Plants for shelter

As a general rule, one can attract more birds by planting trees and shrubs with firm, forked branches for nests, and dense foliage for cover. Thorns, especially large ones, are useful for deterring predators. Many of the plants that are sources of berries also provide shelter: for example, desert hackberry, wolfberry, and pyracantha. Mesquites, palo verdes, hopbushes, and cacti are popular with the birds. Chollas provide nesting sites, and are especially favored by Cactus Wrens, Curve-billed Thrashers, and Mourning Doves. A large saguaro may be used by the Gila Woodpecker or Northern Flicker as a place to excavate a nesting cavity, and this hole in the cactus may be used as a nesting site later by Elf Owls, Brown-crested Flycatchers, or various other birds.

Providing water

In a dry climate, birds are attracted to a source of water. Unfortunately, the traditional style of birdbath can do more harm than good: the stagnant water acts to concentrate harmful organisms and to spread disease from one bird to others. Daily scrubbing of a birdbath may solve this problem, but a better solution is to provide moving water. An effective and economical way to do this is with a device that allows water to drip steadily onto a flat surface. Most birds can get as much water as they need from such a dripper. Besides, the sound of dripping water may catch the attention of migrant birds that are just passing through.

We hope you have enjoyed your visit to our Backyard Bird Garden, and we encourage you to try applying some of these ideas in your own garden or yard. You can help to make our city an even better place for wild birds to live in harmony with people.