

Make Your Land More Appealing to Wild Birds: Maintain Native Plants!

The population of Washington State is expected to double over the next 50 years. As a result, urban and suburban development will increase dramatically, especially in the Puget Sound region. Conservation of birds and other wildlife will become increasingly difficult as natural habitats are lost (Figure 1). Successful conservation will require creative partnerships involving regional and local landowners who manage the land for the benefit of birds. One way we can begin this process is to increase the suitability of both our yards and parks as habitat for native birds. Areas less than an acre or as large as several hundred acres need special components to be attractive nesting areas for birds. University of Washington College of Forest Resources researchers suggest important resources all landowners and land managers can provide to increase the suitability of their lands for nesting birds.

Why do I need to know where birds nest?

Although birds nest in many different species of plants, they have preferences. Knowing what types of plants native birds are likely to nest in can help you choose shrubs and trees that are both attractive to nesting birds and are suited to the conditions of your property.

Where do birds nest?

Researchers at the University of Washington have found birds nesting on the ground, in shrubs, in the lower portions of trees, in the canopy of the forest, and in dead trees (Figure 2). Within these zones, birds are more successful at producing young where dense vegetation obscures the nest. Because birds nesting in the canopy are very difficult to study, this fact sheet focuses on birds that can be found nesting in shrubs and on the ground.

How can I provide nesting opportunities for ground and shrub nesting species?

Birds will nest in your yard if provided with the right habitat. However, birds often have requirements for nesting that are not met by the average yard. A highly manicured yard with non-native plantings is not attractive to most species. To attract nesting birds, plant native species that are suited to the conditions of your yard (Figure 3). If you want to maintain some lawn or exotic shrubs, you can provide habitat for nesting birds by devoting a specific area of your yard to native shrubs. However, this area must be fairly large, and protected from predators such as cats (well fed-cats kill millions of birds each year). A patch of salmonberry 15' by 15' may very well attract a pair of American Robins or Swainson's Thrushes—especially if set against a fence or forest that provides additional cover. Juncos, Song Sparrows, and Spotted Towhees will use a similar-sized patch of sword fern or salal. Birds also nest



Figure 1. Suburban development results in habitat fragmentation, as shown by these aerial photos of Maple Valley (1965, 1979, and 1996). Large-scale fragmentation such as this decreases the suitability of the area as bird habitat, especially when native vegetation is removed from yards, parks, and roadsides.

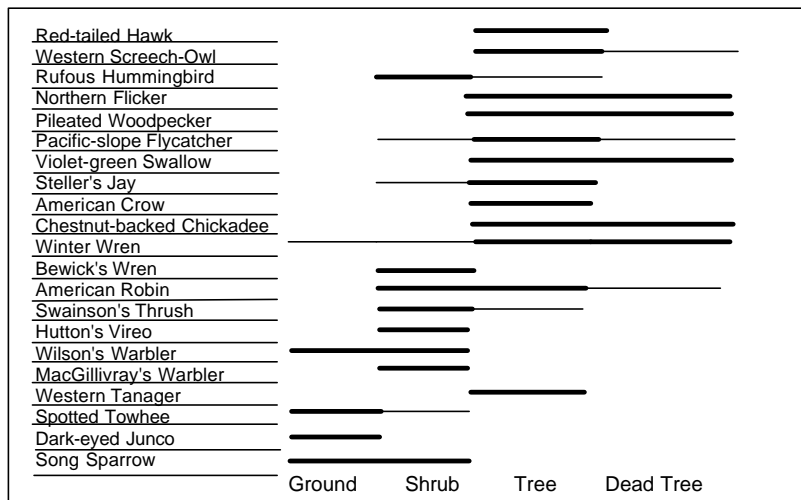


Figure 2. Nest locations of common native birds in the Puget Sound.

————— Indicates the most frequently used nesting location.

————— Indicates occasionally used nesting location.

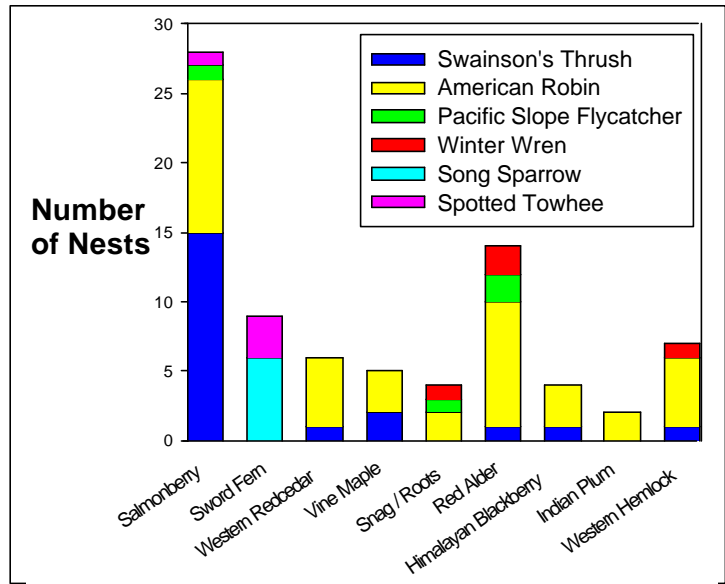


Figure 3. This graph shows the number of nests that were found in a variety of substrates. All plants shown here are native except for the Himalayan blackberry. The importance of native salmonberry is evident.

in larger, but very narrow, patches of vegetation. A simple solution is to plant a strip of native vegetation about six feet wide along one side of your property or, better yet, around the perimeter.

Are there any unusual nesting locations that I should consider?

Yes! Dead upright trees (snags) and downed logs are important for many species, both as a source of food in the form of insects and as nesting sites. Woodpeckers use snags both for feeding and for nesting. Many other birds such as owls, chickadees, and Winter Wrens use old woodpecker holes as nesting sites. Downed logs are also used by many species for feeding and nesting. Another important nesting location is among the roots of upturned trees. This is a favorite nesting spot of Winter Wrens and Pacific-slope Flycatchers. Although unsightly, please allow dead wood to remain on your property.

Is providing a nest site good enough?

It takes more than a good nest site for birds to be successful. If you choose to provide nesting habitat for birds, you must also be willing to protect the birds you attract. It would be better to have a yard devoid of birds than to

attract them to a place where their nesting attempts are doomed to failure. Provide cover to decrease the chance that predators will find the nest. If cats or rats frequent your yard, remove them or don't encourage birds to nest there. Nest failure is also caused by human disturbance. If you know the location of an active nest, avoid the area as much as possible until the young have left the nest. In addition to nesting sites, birds need food and water. Just allowing your property to produce natural foods and to hold water during the dry season can help bird populations.

Contacts:

John Marzluff (corvid@u.washington.edu)
 University of Washington, College of Forest Resources
 Seattle, WA 98195-2100
 (206) 616-6883
 Seattle Audubon Society (info@seattleaudubon.org)
 8050 35th Ave. NE
 Seattle, WA 98115
 Washington Native Plant Society (wnps@blarg.net)
 P.O. Box 28690
 Seattle, WA 98118-8690