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Backyard Wildlife Management for Montana Landowners

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Most landowners interested in management like the idea of having wildlife around their houses. Backyard wildlife usually includes small mammals, such as squirrels and rabbits, as well as a great variety of birds. Artificially feeding large mammals, such as deer, elk, bears, coyotes or raccoons, is strongly discouraged. Invariably, decisions to feed these animals will result in death to the wildlife and heartache to the well-intentioned homeowner. Before undertaking practices to attract wildlife to your backyard, you must understand the implications that go along with this decision.

1. Creating artificial food sources may cause some animals to become dependent on your handout. If the novelty of feeding wears off or if a midwinter vacation calls you away, the animals that have become dependent on your food source may go hungry.
2. Your feeding may cause animals to prefer the artificial food source rather than seek out natural food sources.
3. Unnatural conflicts between the animals may occur when a central food source exists. In the wild, food is usually well distributed and conflicts are less likely.
4. Attracting animals to an area may increase their vulnerability to predators.
5. The food you provide may cause delays in migration, which is sometimes triggered by reductions in food.
6. Feed sites may increase exposure to density-dependent diseases.
7. Artificial feeding may cause the animals to become less wary, which could be fatal when the animal moves to other locations.

On the other hand, there are some benefits to attracting wildlife to your backyard:

1. Your contribution may increase the number of individuals the area can support.
2. By increasing the diversity of foods found on your land, you may help support different species than the area supports naturally.
3. The excellent wildlife-viewing opportunities are satisfying and educational for you and your visitors.

To attract wildlife to your backyard, the three wildlife components must be available. Again, these components are food, water and cover.

Food

Use a diverse selection of plant materials to provide food and shelter for birds and small mammals. Plant many fruit- or seed-bearing plants. Select plants that provide a

combination of visual attractiveness, food and shelter from summer sun and winter weather. For fruits, consider plants such as bittersweet, blackberry, blueberry, currant, elderberry, fire thorn, holly, honeysuckle, huckleberry, plum, rose, snowberry, strawberry, sumac and Virginia creeper. For hummingbird flowers, consider butterfly weed, columbine, coral bells, four o'clocks, foxglove, hollyhock, Indian paintbrush, larkspur, lupine, morning glory, phlox, primrose, trumpet creeper and weigela. Hummingbirds require a constant and diverse supply of flowers from April until late fall. For best results, choose plants that grow well in bright sunny areas. If they are given enough sunlight, plants will produce greater quantities of nectar. Consider planting a section of your garden for wildlife. Incorporate grains such as millet or legumes such as alfalfa and clover. Harvest some of this to use in your feeders during winter. Let the finches and juncos eat what is left. Allow seed-producing annuals to grow in parts of your yard. Dandelion seeds are a favorite of goldfinches, buntings, chipping sparrows and finches. Even lawns can feed several species of birds. Robins, mockingbirds and flickers eat the insects and worms they find there. Remember to minimize your use of pesticides on lawns.

Supplemental Food

Put bird feeders where you can see them from the house. Keep the feeders stocked, especially during winter weather. Shrubs should be close so birds can escape predators. Juncos, sparrows, chickadees, finches, blackbirds, squirrels and chipmunks use seed feeders. Put wedges of oranges, apples and bananas in fruit feeders for bluebirds, towhees, woodpeckers, thrashers and robins. Nectar feeders are primarily for hummingbirds. Suet feeders will be used by woodpeckers and chickadees. Hummingbird feeders should be placed close to flowering plants. Use several feeders and hang them far apart. Hummingbirds are extremely territorial and will be very aggressive toward each other around a limited food source. Use a bee and wasp guard to eliminate competition from these insects. Small insects that gather in the mouth of the feeder provide an important source of protein for hummingbirds. Buy commercial nectar or make your own using one part granulated sugar to four parts boiled water. Do not use sugar substitute or honey. Also, red food coloring is unnecessary and unhealthy for hummingbirds. Clean your hummingbird feeder every two to three days with a solution of one tablespoon white vinegar and one cup water. Be sure to rinse thoroughly. Don't stop feeding hummingbirds in the fall. Depriving them of a food source on which they have become dependent will rob them of nourishment just before they begin their long migration. When temperatures drop, the hummingbirds will leave on their own.

Water

Use birdbaths, decorative ponds or natural sources to supply water for backyard wildlife. Dripping water is especially attractive to birds and can be supplied by rigging a garden hose or a hanging milk jug with a hole in the bottom. Bird baths should be at least 10 feet away from brush on all sides to prevent predators from sneaking up. The water should be less than two inches deep. In winter, bird baths with heaters attract a large variety of birds.

Shelter

You can provide shelter for birds and small mammals in a variety of ways. Pile up broken branches, prunings and other plant materials for rabbits, wrens, towhees and

sparrows. Thorny or densely branched trees and shrubs also provide excellent shelter. Consider planting species like shrub roses, blackberries and Russian olive. A variety of nest boxes are available to attract birds to your yard. European starlings and house sparrows will out-compete native songbirds for cavities and structures. Entrance holes should be less than 1.75 inches in size to keep starlings out of the boxes. The best way to cope with house sparrows is to remove their nests from the boxes.

Other Backyard Wildlife Enhancements

1. Keep part of your garden muddy so robins and swallows can use the mud to build nests.
2. Leave feathers from an old pillow or pieces of yarn or hair four to six inches long in your yard. Birds will use these to build nests.
3. Leave thick, dead branches and dead tree trunks in your yard. Woodpeckers, chickadees, warblers and nuthatches will find insects on them.
4. Keep your cat indoors. Songbirds and cats don't mix!
5. Minimize your use of insecticides. The more insects you have, the more birds will visit your yard.
6. Leave some dry, bare ground where birds can take a dust bath. A nearby pile of sand or crushed eggshells will serve as a source of grit.