

Woods provide food, water, shelter, and space

In Your Backyard Woods

Like you, wildlife requires food, water, shelter, and space. Your backyard woods has all of these things and is likely already home to a host of wildlife species. But not all woods are created equal. In some, wildlife merely survives, in others it thrives.

No matter how large or how small your backyard woods, there are choices you can make and actions you can take to increase the number and variety of wildlife species. Getting to know the local wildlife and the capabilities of your land, setting clear objectives, and understanding your options will help you maximize the appeal of your backyard woods to wildlife.

Planning is key. Remember that every piece of land has its limits, and all the things you want may not be possible. Sound planning will help you avoid disappointments down the road.

Get to know the local wildlife

Learning the types of wildlife in your area will clue you into the possibilities for your woods. Next, hone your expectations—it's important to be specific. Consider whether you will be viewing, photographing, trapping, hunting, or just appreciating the wildlife in your woods. Keep in mind that not all wildlife will make your woods their permanent home. Some will come to raise their young, while others may simply pass through on their way to other places. Still others will visit regularly, but be unable to meet all their needs in your woods alone.

Learn the lay of your land

The more you know about your land the better able you will be to enhance its value for the wildlife you desire. Explore your woods and discover what makes it unique. Also visit others' woods to help you identify what sets yours apart. Here are some things to consider:

- Are the trees all of one type, or are there lots of different types?
- Are there trees and shrubs of varying heights?
- Are the trees needleleaved or broadleaved?

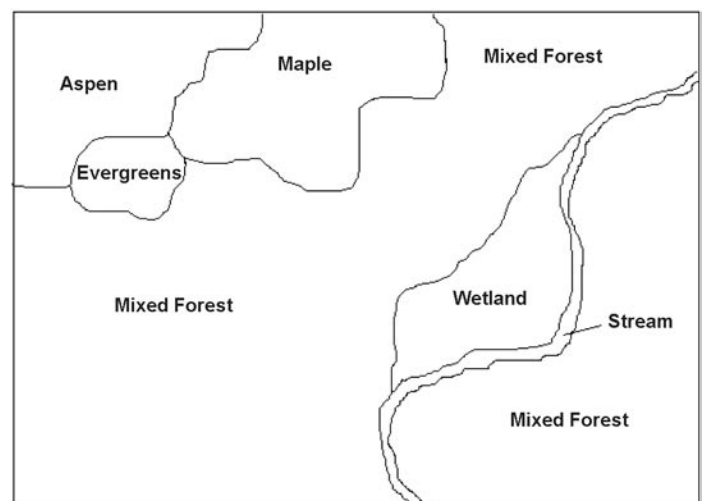
- Are the trees large or small, old or young?
- Are there lots of trees close together, or fewer trees farther apart?
- Is your woods dark and shady, or relatively sunny?

Wildlife habitat can take many forms. That isn't to say all habitats are equal. There are a number of key habitat features that are especially valuable to wildlife. As you walk through your woods look for these features:

- Streams, ponds, or other wetlands
- Openings without trees
- Trees and shrubs that produce nuts, berries, or other fruits
- Standing dead trees and fallen logs
- Fencelines and hedgerows
- Rock outcrops and caves.

The more often you visit the woods and the more carefully you look, the more you will learn. Be sure to keep a record of what you find.

If you have not already made a made a master plan, draw a map of your woods that displays its prominent features. (See the Backyard Woods Tip Sheet on Make a Master Plan for more information.) A map, like this one, is a



handy way to record what you learn, and a useful tool in identifying backyard woods improvement projects.

Understand your options

Once you know your land, and the kind of wildlife you want to attract, you are ready to identify those things you can do for wildlife in your backyard woods. Food, water, shelter, and space are the cornerstones of any wildlife habitat. Changing the amount or distribution of one or more of these can make your woods a more welcoming place for wildlife.

Food—the backyard woods buffet

Food attracts wildlife, and your backyard woods buffet is open around the clock. A variety of native trees, shrubs, and herbs will satisfy even the most finicky eaters. Providing a smorgasbord is the surest way to draw the wildlife you desire. Now is the time to revisit the map and records of your woods, and become familiar with the wildlife foods found there.

Deer, rabbits, and mice are drawn to openings where they can find leafy trees and shrubs, as well as grasses and forbs. Small treeless openings that provide breaks in the tree canopy are popular with wildlife. Whether openings are created through chance by a windstorm or deliberately by your removing trees for firewood or lumber, openings add variety to your backyard woods.



An opening in the woods creates habitat for white-tailed deer.

If soil and light conditions are right you can plant trees or shrubs, particularly ones that flower and bear fruit. If possible select plants that bloom and fruit at different times to assure a well-stocked buffet that is always ready for guests. Choose native species—those that occur naturally in your area. They are best suited to local conditions and often fare better than nonnatives. Flowers offer nectar and pollen, and will attract butterflies, bees, and humming-

birds. Berries and other fruits may bring birds and bears. Dozens of wildlife species are known to feed on nuts such as acorns.

Sometimes your efforts to entice may prove a little too successful, and wildlife may begin sampling your favorite vegetable garden or prized ornamentals. It is up to you whether to take action to deter wildlife or simply accept their unscheduled visits as one of the benefits of your backyard woods.

Of course not all wildlife are vegetarians; some are predators—animals that feed on other animals. Coyotes, foxes, weasels, hawks, and snakes are among the predators that may be looking to dine in your woods. The larger predators are typically few in number and wary by nature. If you glimpse one in your woods you are lucky indeed.

You may unknowingly introduce an unwanted predator into your backyard woods. Some statistics identify house cats as major predators of migratory birds. A free-roaming cat can prey on birds and baby mammals. Keeping cats indoors protects your wildlife.

Water—wet 'n wildlife

If you have a stream, pond, lake, or wetland within or bordering your woods, count yourself fortunate. Wildlife is drawn to water. This is all the more reason to treat it



A stream provides water and habitat for all kinds of animals.

with great care. Leave at least a 30-foot wide undisturbed strip next to the water to provide space for wildlife and to protect the water from other activities in your woods. Don't risk spoiling a major wildlife attraction.

The absence of open water in your woods does not mean it will not attract wildlife. Animals meet their water needs in various ways. Some get all they need from the foods they eat, and others drink dew or raindrops that cling to plants.

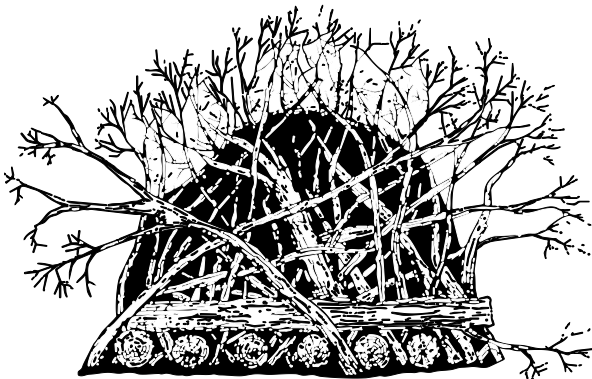
Sometimes wildlife will create wet habitat. Beavers are famous for their ability to dam streams. The ponds they create are bonanzas for other water-loving wildlife as well. If there are no beavers in your backyard woods don't despair. In some circumstances it may be feasible for you to create a pond. Seek help from local conservation agencies. They can help determine if your woods is suited for a pond, and may even be able to cover some of the project costs.

Shelter—the creature comforts

Shelter is critical to wildlife. It offers protection from the elements, safety from predators, a place to raise young, or simply a resting place. Fortunately, wildlife requires minimal accommodations, such as a leaf, fallen log, or hole in the ground.

The clean look you may enjoy in your lawn is not well suited to your backyard woods and the wildlife found there. Piles of brush or rocks are wonderful hiding spots for squirrels, chipmunks, rabbits, snakes, and other small animals. Next time you are cutting brush or pruning trees, consider piling the cut branches in your woods. Be careful not to overdo the cutting; however, wildlife need plenty of living shrubs and other vegetation. Caution: Brush piles should be created only outside the fire safety zone

Brush Pile



Brush piles are easy to construct, and they provide homes for small animals.

around structures. The zone should be at least 30 feet wide on level or gently sloping ground and 100 feet or more on slope grades 30 percent or greater down hill from any structure. (See the Backyard Woods Tip Sheet on Protect Your Property From Wildfire for more information.)

Planting shade-tolerant (able to survive in partial shade) needleleaf trees within an otherwise broadleaf woods will increase its appeal to wildlife. Needleleaf trees, especially those in dense clumps with branches near the ground, give all-season protection.

Vibrant, healthy trees are the dominant feature in most woods and are certainly important to wildlife. Dead and dying trees—whether standing, leaning, or fallen—also play a vital role. Trees weakened by age, disease, or injuries attract insects, which in turn attract insect-eating animals. Through decay and the work of woodpeckers and other wildlife excavators, cavities eventually appear in many dead and dying trees. You want an abundant supply of cavities in your backyard woods. Scores of birds and mammals from wrens to raccoons take shelter in such cavities. Birdhouses and other types of nest boxes are another popular and effective way to add cavities. You can buy or build a variety of sizes and shapes aimed at accommodating various species; however, don't be discouraged if nest boxes attract unintended occupants!



A den tree is home to different animals at different times.

Once dead and dying trees fall, other wildlife, such as rabbits, toads, and worms take advantage of their shelter. You and the wildlife don't have to wait for trees to die. Girdling—removing bark from a 3-to 5-inch ring completely around the tree—will hasten its demise. Start

slow and monitor the results before girdling too many trees in your woods. Seek the advice of an arborist or consulting forester before girdling a tree. Some trees are better to girdle than others.

Space—in three dimensions

You probably know the number of acres your woods covers, but that only includes two dimensions. The space available for attracting wildlife is much greater. Like a high-rise hotel your woods extends vertically from the roots and soil to the treetops. Adding rooms to your wildlife hotel may be easier than you think. Vegetation of varying heights is what provides a full range of suites.



A mix of needleleaf and broadleaf trees of various heights provides living space for animals.

The good news is that many of the same practices used to increase sunlight and add food and shelter encourage plants to grow, and increase vertical structure. Grasses and forbs, shrubs and vines, and small and tall trees allow wildlife to abound.

As your woods grows more diverse vertically, you can expect new visitors. Wildlife that climb and fly will benefit most from the extra layers. Many warblers and other long distance migrants seek out a richly layered woods

and will nest in nothing less. Even the smallest backyard woods can burgeon with space for wildlife when you plan for the third dimension.

Going vertical is not the answer for all wildlife—some simply need more room to roam. Your woods may not be large, but if it adjoins other woods, you can join forces with other landowners to multiply the area available to wildlife. Strike up a conversation with your neighbor and share your enthusiasm for wildlife. A number of state programs exist to help landowners work together and cooperatively manage lands that reach well beyond their own backyard woods. Seek more information at Cooperative Extension Service, Soil and Water Conservation District, or State Forestry agency offices.

In the Forest

Forest managers do their best to balance the needs of wildlife with the growing demand for wildlife-related recreation opportunities. And they do it using many of the same practices applied in your backyard woods. Harvesting timber, creating small openings, protecting wetlands and other water resources, placing nest boxes, and cooperating with neighboring landowners are all part of managing forests for wildlife.

Diverse and abundant wildlife is an indicator of a healthy forest and in many places is an indicator of a healthy economy. Many communities count on teeming wildlife populations to lure hunters, anglers, and wildlife watchers. Forest managers monitor some species of wildlife to track trends in their numbers. Dramatic shifts in wildlife populations can warn of important changes in the health of forests, which may warrant changes in management practices.

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