

The Birds and the Butterflies: Part 1

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People often ask how they can attract birds and/or butterflies to their properties. They usually expect an answer pertaining to birdfeeders and seed types or massive plantings of those invasive, Asian [butterfly-bushes \(*Buddleja davidii*\)](#). Folks already familiar with the “plant native plants” philosophy expect an answer listing either berry-rich or nectar-drenched endemic flora—and we’ll save those selections for Part 2. However, all of these options address a limited number of adult animals. If you truly wish to convert your yard into a bird and butterfly sanctuary, create an environment that feeds the young. Considering that most birds feed their hatchlings caterpillars, i.e. butterfly and moth larvae, a step towards a bird and butterfly haven may be realized by planting caterpillar-friendly landscapes.

Let’s take a closer look at moths and butterflies. These insects belong to the order Lepidoptera, and metamorphose in a four-stage lifecycle: egg, larva (caterpillar), pupa (cocoon for moths, chrysalis for butterflies), and the winged adult. Most people never notice the eggs or pupa, and the adults are the big draw. On the other hand, when caterpillars are found, they are usually caught red-handed munching on plants. Folks retaliate with insecticides. How are butterflies going to beautify the garden if they get killed as youngsters? A true butterfly garden incorporates organically grown plants intended for larval grazing, and even then the plant merely suffers a few holey leaves. For example, the spicebush swallowtail (*Papilio troilus*) larvae only feast upon spicebush (*Lindera benzoin*) and sassafras trees (*Sassafras albidum*). A large population of zebra swallowtails (*Eurytides marcellus*) resides in this area; you can find them fluttering in Great Falls National Park all May long—the year’s first and biggest brood. Its caterpillars exclusively reside on pawpaws (*Asimina triloba*). With far less discriminating tastes, tiger swallowtail (*Pterourus glaucus*) larvae chomp on many different native tree and shrub foliage, and hence the adults frequent KPW. Herbaceous plant hosts include milkweeds and butterfly weeds (genus *Asclepias*), upon which monarchs (*Danaus plexippus*) develop into butterflies. Some gardeners-turned-species-rescuers added white turtleheads (*Chelone glabra*) onto their plot, knowing the larvae of the rare Baltimore checkerspot butterfly (*Euphydryas phaeton*) prefers this plant. People might mistake large, majestic moths, such as the regal moth (*Citheronia regalis*), for butterflies. Equally noble is this species’ larva, which grows into a five-inch-long caterpillar called the hickory horn devil. It descends from hickories in autumn, pupates underground over winter, and emerges as an adult the following year.

Most lepidopterans, especially moths, lack a showy form, both as tiny, grayish adults and as small, nondescript green or brown caterpillars. However, they provide nutrition to countless bird species, especially nestlings. Trees particularly bestow these insects with both food and shelter; oaks alone support over 500 lepidopterans, not to mention other arthropods! Extremely high tannin levels render oak leaves inedible to humans, but caterpillars evolved to handle these plant defenses. Heavily grooved and textured bark offers plenty of insect hiding places, so enough survive predation to reproduce. Birds view trees as carry-out buffets rich in insect diversity, for birds will consume other insects in addition to lepidopterans. Backyard bird watching already reveals how the more conspicuous carnivores (swifts, wrens, robins) depend on invertebrates, yet birds associated with seed-filled birdfeeders, such as black-cap chickadees (*Parus atricapillus*), actually prefer invertebrates, too. Furthermore, the chickadee chicks’ diet heavily relies upon caterpillars. Even seed-loving cardinals (*Cardinalis cardinalis*) primarily feed insects to their hatchlings.

People might want to select a plant to attract a certain bird or insect. Besides species identification, many bird and butterfly field guides discuss the animal’s ideal habitat and favorite menu items. Remember that virtually any native plant benefits some sort of wildlife. Perhaps you wonder which plants will best grow in your yard’s soil? What about moisture and light conditions? Maybe you are willing to give native plants a try, but only if you can find a variety producing a certain blossom color during particular months? Those answers and photographs of recommended species are found in the Native Plant Database at <http://www.wildflower.org/plants/>. Would you like to see more examples of how to enticing benevolent wildlife to your garden through selecting the proper plants? The increasingly popular book, [Bringing Nature Home](#), by Douglas W. Tallamy (2007, Timber Press) provides more outstanding ideas about eco-friendly landscaping. Only through native plantings can we truly invite the birds and butterflies to accent our gardens with natural beauty. Continued in [Part 2](#).

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