

Wildlife Corridors

By Greg Sykes (greg@grsykes.com)

In the March 2013 edition, we learned about [habitat islands](#): environmental pockets suitable for a given organism to survive. Locally, habitat islands may occur in parks, native gardens, and other isolated plots. “Wildlife corridors” connect fragmented habitats, enabling animals to travel between the islands. A wildlife corridor may be a land segment left in its natural state, like the stream valley parks lining Royal Lake’s tributaries and networking downstream with broader, wild areas. The corridors could be manmade, such as a highway overpass covered with soil, shrubs, and trees. A fish ladder—an artificial, tiered stream routing around a dam or other obstacle like the one at Great Falls National Park—is especially geared towards spawning migrations. Wildlife corridors widen a critter’s range, expand interbreeding, and reduce wildlife conflicts with dense urbanization. What may be an island for one organism may be part of another’s corridor.

Does KPW have wildlife corridors? Though smaller and more developed than parks, individual backyards—with mature oaks, hickories, and beeches—function together as miniature, interconnected forests. Indigenous trees offer the food and shelter that allow animals, like pilliated woodpeckers (*Dryocopus pileatus*) and red admiral butterflies (*Vanessa atalanta*), to move from parks, through yards, and back. Understory native plants assist eastern box turtles (*Terrapene carolina carolina*), salamanders, wood frogs (*Rana sylvatica*), and the like to transit properties. On the other hand, if KPW was completely paved or plowed, most wildlife would avoid the vast, uninhabitable barrier.

Given Northern Virginia’s natural ecosystems, forests characterize the typical terrestrial wildlife corridors. Some property owners enjoy trees but fear them crashing onto the home. Instead of clear-cutting the yard, consider some compromises:

- Keep shade trees healthy. Have them inspected for damage and pruned by a licensed arborist.
- Select small tree species [eastern redbud (*Cercis canadensis*), flowering dogwood (*Cornus florida*), or witch-hazel (*Hamamelis virginiana*)] to plant near dwellings. Always plan for tree growth for the particular species; branches and roots should not touch the house or foundation.
- Wildlife generally prefer long-lived hardwoods such as oaks but these trees grow slowly. Remember that even young trees afford benefits to wildlife, which continue into maturity.
- Alternatively, plant fast-growing trees, such as river birch (*Betula nigra*) or black cherry (*Prunus serotina*), and harvest them after they reach a determined height. Keep some of the self-seeded seedlings from the parent tree; the little ones fill out in several years. Repeat the harvest cycle once those trees exceed a desired height. This method may provide a comfortable canopy option over towering trees or empty lawns.
- Use trees able to better survive low cuts, such as river birches. Evolved to withstand beaver browsing, birches send multiple shoots up from the stump, giving the desired “clustered trunk” appearance. Warning: there is always the risk that chopping down the tree will kill it.

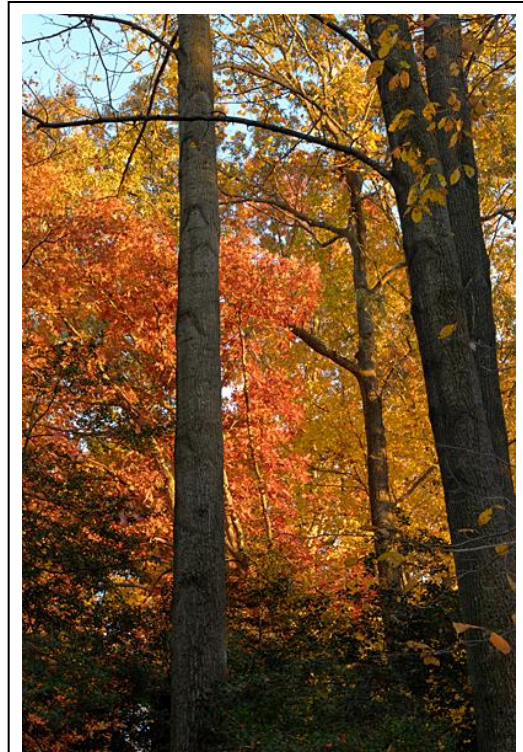


Figure 1. Backyard trees are excellent foundations for Northern Virginia’s wildlife corridors, even if the species combinations rarely occur in nature. These autumnal specimens include the southern red oak (*Quercus falcata*), red maple (*Acer rubrum*), tulip poplar (*Liriodendron tulipifera*), and black gum (*Nyssa sylvatica*). Dark green American hollies (*Ilex opaca*) populate the lower canopy.

By uniting with your neighbors and creating native woodland areas, we can expand the neighborhood's beneficial habitat islands and wildlife corridors. Learn more about these concepts here:

<http://www.nwf.org/wildlife/wildlife-conservation/flyways-and-wildlife-corridors.aspx>

<http://www.nwf.org/What-We-Do/Protect-Wildlife/Wildlife-Corridors.aspx>

<http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/10/081020135221.htm>

<http://blogs.smithsonianmag.com/smartnews/2012/12/its-not-safe-for-turtles-to-cross-the-road-humans-make-sure-of-that/>

For additional tree tips, check out these back issues:

Tree Time (2008-10) http://www.grsykes.com/pdf/eco-articles/11b_2008-10.pdf

IMA Q/A's: Tree Questions (2011-06) http://www.grsykes.com/pdf/eco-articles/29_2011-06.pdf



Figure 2. A wooded backyard provides ideal plots for native “forest floors.” This springtime patch contains maidenhair fern (*Adiantum pedatum*), Christmas fern (*Polystichum acrostichoides*), toad trillium (*Trillium sessile*), Virginia bluebell (*Mertensia virginica*), Solomon’s seal (*Polygonatum* sp.), liverleaf (*Hepatica acutiloba*), wild bleeding heart (*Dicentra eximia*), mayapple (*Podophyllum peltatum*), woodland poppy (*Stylophorum diphyllum*), and creeping phlox (*Phlox stolonifera*). Avoiding pesticides, herbicides, and other synthetic yard chemicals encourages a healthy environment. The verdant garden shown here is completely organic.

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