

Keeping the Wildlife Wild: Part 2

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In [Keeping the Wildlife Wild: Part 1](#) (October 2016), we learned how feeding wildlife has a detrimental impact on the very critters that folks want to help. Many people feeding wild animals have their hearts in the right place, so what is someone who wants to assist wildlife to do? Here are some ways you can truly support Earth's creatures:

- **Grow native plant gardens and shrubbery:** birds directly consume berries, seeds, and nuts. Foliage nourishes many insects, which feed birds, toads, frogs, bats, and a host of additional animals. Small birds and mammals attract hawks and other predators. Nature's hunters keep the ecosystem balanced. Creating a native garden returns some of the habitat lost through urbanization and encroachment. Go ahead and tear up that unused lawn—the part with the hard-to-mow hill or along a fence line—and sink in those Virginia native plants! Whenever possible, include water-saving features like rain gardens. BONUS: You can watch wildlife interactions from a comfortable home!
 - Most biologists consider bird feeders acceptable and encourage providing sustenance during harsh winter conditions, when nuts and seeds become scarce. However, survey data indicate some bird species frequenting the feeders are becoming plump, growing shorter wings, and increasingly less likely to migrate.
- **Replace your exotic invasive plants with native specimens:** in addition to replacing ecologically worthless weeds with beneficial natives, destroying those invasive species prevents them from spreading outside of your yard. A partial list of plants to avoid can be found here: [Invasive Plant Q/As: the Short-List](#).
- **Respect property lines:** clearing natural landscapes, setting up play areas, or dumping garbage or yard debris on property other than your own or without the owner's permission constitutes encroachment. These acts degrade and rob habitat from wildlife, especially in parks.
- **Pick up trash:** garbage harms wildlife as the animals swallow or get tangled in it. Pet waste fouls the immediate area and impairs downstream water quality. Junk like e-waste and batteries corrode and discharge toxins. Bottles, cans, and plastic bags and containers trap water and become breeding pools for mosquitoes. Plastics break into smaller and smaller pieces, inevitably winding their way into the ocean and potentially leaching toxins along the course. From pavement to parklands, remove litter wherever it is found.
- **Avoid using pesticides and herbicides:** while targeting a group of organisms, many of these poisons are not species-specific, so they end up creating collateral damage, especially to sensitive aquatic life as they wash into waterways.
- **Avoid using synthetic fertilizers:** lawn chemicals contain excessive nutrients, 90 percent of which end up washing into and polluting streams, lakes, rivers, and eventually the Chesapeake



Figure 1. During a blizzard, this American robin (*Turdus migratorius*) fuels up on winterberries (*Ilex verticillata*) from a native hedge. When snow obscures many food sources and refilling bird feeders might be dicey (and species like robins shun typical bird feeders), birds benefit the most from native plants for nourishment and shelter. People can enjoy the native plants' aesthetics, the wildlife visitors, and knowing how this landscaping helps the overall environment in any season.

Bay. Switching to compost, organic fertilizers, and natural soil amenders is the environmentally healthy choice.

- **Keep vehicles properly maintained:** fuel, oil, and antifreeze leaks contaminate the environment and poison critters wandering into or licking up these puddles. Susceptible aquatic fauna takes a hit when hazardous compounds wash into waterways. Properly dispose of automotive and household toxic materials by bringing them to a hazardous material handling facility such as the I-66 Transfer Station.
- **Keep pets leashed, fenced in, or indoors:** unleashed dogs may harass other animals, both wild and domesticated. A study in *Nature Communication* (Loss et al., 2013) estimated that free-ranging domestic cats kill 1.3–4.0 billion birds and 6.3–22.3 billion mammals each year in the United States. The other side of allowing pooches and kitties to run free is that they have higher injury and death rates due to anything from getting hit by cars to, for cat-sized pets, becoming dinner for local coyotes.
- **Volunteer in habitat restoration projects:** from watershed cleanups to removing non-native invasive weeds from parks, there is a way for you to help! A great place to get started is Volunteer Fairfax www.volunteerfairfax.org. County-sanctioned groups are active around Royal Lake, including:
 - the Invasive Management Area (IMA) program www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/resource-management/ima/
 - KPW Parks & Lakes Committee: contact parks@kpwca.org
 - Friends of Royal Lake: contact friendsofroyallake@gmail.com
 - Road Raiders: contact sarahjlennon@gmail.com

If you are physically unable to perform fieldwork but would still like to aid park efforts, you can always spread the word and recruit others.

- **Share this article:** for one reason or another, someone who could benefit the most from this material or other information in the Eco-Article series might have missed seeing it. Feel free to bridge the language barrier and translate these manuscripts for people who are working on mastering English. While the subjects pertain to Northern Virginian ecology, the readership extends from Maine to Florida and west of the Mississippi as folks learn how we handle environmental issues and then apply those principles to their neck of the woods. The entire series is available at www.grsykes.com/eco-articles/. Best of all, most articles have additional references—anything from website links to peer-reviewed scientific journal articles—for readers to delve deeper into the subject.

Remember that if the wild animal reacts to your presence, chances are you are too close; if an animal approaches you from a distance, other people have already inappropriately interacted with it or it is ill. Clearly, there are many ways you can be a true friend to wildlife while keeping a healthy space. As I tell volunteers at the end of habitat restoration workdays, “It’s not the ‘thanks’ that you hear from me that is important. It’s the unheard gratitude from the wildlife and future generations that matters most.”

Native gardens ideas and suggested plants can be found in the Eco-Article Archives:

The Birds and the Butterflies: Part 1 www.grsykes.com/pdf/eco-articles/15b_2009-06.pdf

The Birds and the Butterflies: Part 2 www.grsykes.com/pdf/eco-articles/17a_2009-09.pdf

Hummingbird Attraction www.grsykes.com/pdf/eco-articles/39b_2012-10.pdf

Some Native Plant Suggestions www.grsykes.com/pdf/eco-articles/64_2016-01.pdf

Articles regarding bird feeders:

www.birds.cornell.edu/AllAboutBirds/notes/BirdNote01_WinterFeeding.pdf

www.nwf.org/News-and-Magazines/National-Wildlife/Birds/Archives/2011/Effects-of-Bird-Feeding.aspx

<http://feederwatch.org/blog/impacts-supplemental-feeding-bird-populations/>

www.hummingbird-guide.com/stop-feeding-hummingbirds.html

Reference on cats impacting the environment:

Loss, Scott R., Tom Will, and Peter P. Marra. 2013. The impact of free-ranging domestic cats on wildlife of the United States. *Nature Communications*.

<http://www.nature.com/ncomms/journal/v4/n1/full/ncomms2380.html>

Marra, Peter P. and Chris Santella. 2016. *Cat Wars: The Devastating Consequences of a Cuddly Killer*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey. pp. 216.

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/animalia/wp/2016/10/18/a-wildlife-rehab-center-confirms-that-cats-are-killers/>

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