

OPINION

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Open your backyard to wildlife

Creating a sanctuary for birds and other creatures can be a family project

PORTAGE PARK DISTRICT FOUNDATION

With summer in full swing my back yard is a constant source of joy for me.

Outside, I am happy to spend time fussing over perennials, pulling weeds, and spreading manure.

Inside, from the vantage point of my kitchen window, I revel in the amazing amount of bird and animal life that is transpiring before my eyes. Years ago when our children were young, we embarked on a family project to create a backyard sanctuary for wildlife of all types.

Following guidelines set out by the National Wildlife Federation (NWF) in its Backyard Wildlife Habitat Program, we read up on how to attract and protect birds and critters by providing shelter, food and water — just what we all need.

With a little research, we learned what plants attract different types of wildlife.

Pines, junipers, serviceberries, hollies, and Virginia creeper, for example, are all excellent sources for food and shelter for birds throughout the year. Even dead trees will suit as well as shrubs, thickets and brush piles.

For food, NWF recommends planting native species and hanging bird feeders in safe locations. Trees or shrubs that bear fruit or nuts are a big plus along with plants that provide nectar, pollen, and sap. But if you do not have access to a yard or are limited in space, you can always hang out feeders for the birds as well as feeders for squirrels, butterflies and hummingbirds.

Wildlife need water for drinking, bathing and reproduction. If you are lucky enough to live near a river or lake, then you have a natural resource that will fill the bill. But if those options are not available, you can always set out a bird bath or perhaps install a rain garden.

The NWF program encourages the creation of a natural habitat in your own yard and provides an official certificate for those who meet the requirements. To learn more, go to the website at: www.nwf.org/Get-Outside/Outdoor-Activities/Garden-for-Wildlife/Create-a-Habitat.aspx or search on

GREEN

PORTAGE

Helen Tremaine Gregory



Google for "NWF Certified Habitat."

This can be a wonderful project to undertake with children while instilling in them a sensitivity to our natural environment. They can help you research different types of food, shelter and water sources needed for the birds and animals you want to attract and then draw up a sketch of the plan. The NWF web site provides examples of what types of food, shelter, and water might work.

No property is too small or unusual. Over the years, the organization has certified such diverse places as fire stations, nursing homes, terrace gardens, and even the Governor's Mansion in Topeka, Kansas.

In a recent study carried out in Florida, researchers found that certified habitats had more species of birds, butterflies, mammals and other animals than adjacent yards and randomly selected homes. Due to the success of the home backyard program, NWF has expanded the idea to include larger groups such as schools, communities, and places of worship. Close to 140,000 sites across the country have become Certified Wildlife Habitats.

According to the National Wildlife Federation, "Whether you have an apartment balcony or 20-acre farm, you can create a garden that attracts beautiful wildlife and helps restore habitat in commercial and residential areas." Go to www.nwf.org for more information and certification.

Helen Tremaine Gregory is a member of the Portage Park District Foundation Board. Green Portage is a monthly feature in the Record-Courier in cooperation with the Portage Park District.