

*Sunflower seeds, hummingbird nectar and other foods attract a wide variety of birds to backyard viewing areas. But if you want to enjoy up-close looks at catbirds, tanagers, warblers and other birds that seldom visit feeders, you've got to be sure to*

# Wet Your Whistlers

*by Jim Low*



**T**wo birding enthusiasts I know built their dream home on a patchwork of forest and meadows in the Ozarks. They installed dozens of bird feeders and cultivated an assortment of plants to make their homestead attractive to feathered visitors. They provided grit and nest boxes and guarded against depredation by feral cats.

They attracted the usual, garden-variety birds to their window-lined, wrap-around deck. But some species rarely came close to the house. When the Audubon Society gathered at John and Ellen's place, we often visited a half-acre pond hidden in the woods at the back of their property. In the margins around this isolated pool, we could watch tanagers, catbirds, warblers and other non-feeder birds feasting on berries and bugs or splashing among the cattails.

John and Ellen could have enticed those elusive pond visitors right up to the house. You can, too, by making water part of your bird-attracting strategy.

## Water Drippers

Water supplies needn't be elaborate. Among the simplest is a source of dripping water that splashes onto leaves or into a shallow container below. Birds are quickly attracted to the sound of dripping water.

Bird-feeding shops sell hose attachments that create a fine water mist. These work best when mounted in the low branches of a tree. The mist dripping off leaves and branches has a hypnotic effect on some birds, which will take lengthy showers in the drizzle and sip drops from leaf tips.

Some people hang a garden hose over a birdbath and adjust the valve to produce a steady drip. You can build a portable dripper without a hose in minutes. Take a bucket or can (preferable covered, to reduce evaporation and exclude trash) and punch a half-inch hole in the bottom. Thread a

piece of cotton cloth snugly through the hole so it hangs out the bottom an inch or so. Adjust the fit so it drips two or three times a second, and place it over a birdbath, pan or other shallow water receptacle to produce a dripping sound.

## Birdbaths

Birdbaths come in a wide range of prices, materials and styles. You can get a plastic model at a discount store for as little as \$12, or you can pay hundreds of dollars for an ornate ceramic creation with cherubs spouting water.

Some folks make their own birdbaths, investing considerable energy and imagination in the task. One I saw several years ago was concrete with a massive pedestal and a shallow bowl three feet across. The entire outer surface had rock crystals embedded in the concrete.

You needn't be that elaborate, but it gives you an idea of the possibilities. You can use redwood, driftwood, worn-out tires or whatever material is handy. Plastic sheeting makes the bowl waterproof.

Birds don't like their baths more than three inches deep. If you must work with a deeper bowl, add rocks or other objects to make shallow spots where birds can stand. A terra-cotta bowl gives a bird secure footing, but staying upright on a wet, glazed ceramic surface is difficult, making birds feel unsafe. The same adhesive-backed, nonskid strips that make your tub safe work just as well in birdbaths.

You must empty your birdbath to clean it, so be sure you build in a drain hole. You may also want to add features like a raised rim where birds can perch and preen while drying off, a gently sloping bottom for a full range of depths, and a pedestal at least three feet tall to make the bath less accessible to snakes and cats. Birds need water every day, so fill your birdbath often.

It's tempting to add algae-killing chemicals, cleansers like soap or bleach, or glycerin to prevent freezing, but never fill a birdbath with anything but pure water. Clean the basin twice

weekly in summer, using a high-pressure hose or stiff brush, and place your birdbaths away from feeders so they don't get fouled with seed hulls and droppings.

If you put your birdbath flush against bushes, you invite the local tabby to set an ambush there. On the other hand, if you place it in the middle of your lawn, you expose bathers to flying predators. Compromise. Position your birdbath 10 or 15 feet from the nearest predator hiding spot. Birds that like the cover of undergrowth will find this close enough for visits. Further reassure them by placing the bath beneath a canopy of low trees. Hanging birdbaths in such places are especially safe.

One of the nicest things about birdbaths is their mobility. You can move them to different spots in your yard according to the season and the preferences of your birds. But there are plenty of options for those who want something more.

## Mini-Ponds

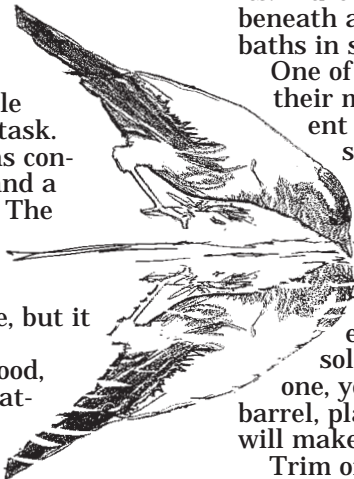
Some yards have room for more than a birdbath, but not quite enough for a full-blown pond. The solution may be mini-ponds. To make one, you need a plastic trash can, a wooden barrel, plastic planter or steel drum. A barrel will make two mini-ponds when cut in half.

Trim off as much of the container wall as necessary to avoid excessive depth. Then bury it flush with the ground. Arrange these mini-ponds in clusters, or scatter them around your yard in a variety of settings. If you furnish your mini-pond with submerged rocks or wooden shelves as perching spots, you can make the container a foot or more deep and avoid the need for frequent refilling.

## Backyard Wetlands

Does your yard have a low area that stays wet half the year? The traditional approach to such areas is to spend lots of labor and money fighting nature to get rid of a "swamp." If you shift your perspective, however, you can work with nature, reduce your work and cultivate a bird-attracting marsh.

Encourage your would-be wetland by creating a soil terrace at the lower end. A wet-weather drainage running through your property also offers opportunities for watering birds. A low concrete weir or shallow excavation in



the bed of the drainage can trap water birds will love. Leave a brushy corridor along both sides of the drainage, to give birds protection. (Be aware that you need a permit from the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to modify the flood plain of a bona fide stream.)

## **Ponds**

If you have the room, the money and the energy, there's nothing like a pond to attract a variety of birds and other wildlife. "Pond" can mean a six-foot-square puddle or a 10-acre fishing hole. Those big enough to support fishing are great, but they're beyond the scope of this article. For a project this size, you need a landscape architect's advice about dam design and the size pond your drainage area will support.

You can build small ponds yourself. Before rushing into the job, though, check local ordinances and neighborhood covenants. Some areas don't allow ponds; others have requirements for fencing around even small bodies of water. It's also wise to determine how the addition of a pond will affect the cost of your liability insurance.

When choosing a pond site, stay away from full shade. Without sunlight, algae and larger plants that fuel the living system can't do their job. Ideally, part of the pond should be in full sunlight, and part should be shaded.

The easiest way to build a pond is to buy a rigid plastic or fiberglass liner and bury it even with the ground. A children's swimming pool is perfect. A six-footer is big enough for a pond that will hold a few potted plants and half a dozen goldfish. You can also use plastic liners made especially for this purpose. These are available from many garden supply companies.

Even more fun is a pond tailor-made for the shape and layout of your yard. Start with a length of rope equal to the circumference of your imaginary pool. By laying out the rope and moving it around, you can test several different configurations before doing anything permanent with a shovel. Once you find an arrangement you like, outline the rope's position in the soil with a spade, then move the rope out of the way.

Before you start digging, decide what you want out of your pond. Do you want to grow aquatic plants or fish? Even a small pond can support these, at least through the warm months. Besides adding to the aesthetics of your pond, fish keep mosquito larvae in check. The pond should have spots at least three feet

deep to support fish through the winter.

To make sure your pond is level, lay a two-by-four across the basin and put a carpenter's level on it. The inside of the pond should be stair-stepped—shallow around the edge and deeper at the center. This creates a shelf for aquatic plants and deeper water that allows fish to thrive year-round. You should also dig a shallow lip around the pool where you can lay edging stones to make your pond more attractive and stabilize the bank.

Line the bottom of your pond with concrete or waterproof sheeting made of polyvinyl chloride (PVC) or butyl rubber. Each has its own advantages, limitations and construction requirements.

Concrete ponds should be drained in winter to prevent cracking if the water freezes. When properly installed, however, concrete is extremely durable and reasonably inexpensive. Cover the soil surface with sand, then lay a framework of concrete reinforcing wire. Cover the wire with three to four inches of concrete. The results will be best if the concrete is poured all at once instead of in batches.

Check the cost of mixing your own concrete compared to having ready-mixed concrete delivered. If you carefully estimate the number of bags of concrete mix needed and take into account the cost of renting a mixer and the time and work involved, you'll probably decide buying ready-mix is a bargain.

Sheet liners are easier to work with than concrete, but they're more fragile and demand more care. Butyl rubber liners cost more than PVC, but they last up to 50 years, compared to 10 or 15 for PVC. If you go with a sheet liner, remove all sticks, roots, rocks and other objects that could puncture your liner. Then smooth the bed with a rake.

The plastic liner should be large enough to cover the inside surface of the pond, with a couple feet extra extending around the outside edge. Lay the liner, then anchor the edges with large, flat stones, leaving a foot or two extra for settling. When your work is complete, trim excess sheeting around the rocks, and plant flowers and shrubs to dress up the border and stabilize the bank.

Wait several days after filling the pond before introducing plants. Chlorinated water might kill them. Include a few gallons of water, mud and snails from an established pond. This will

give your pond life a jumpstart. Good pond plants include water lilies, cattails, buttonbush, pondweed, elodea, water milfoil, arrowhead, swamp milkweed and pickerel weed. Cultivated varieties are available from garden supply companies, but you can save money by collecting wild plants growing in streams or ponds where you have permission to take them. Plant them in heavy pots, and place along the shallow step around the edge of the pond. From time to time, remove the pots and fertilize as you would any potted plant.

There are dozens of improvements you can add to the basic ponds described here, such as waterfalls for an extra touch of beauty or recir-

culating fountains to keep water from stagnating. Your pond can be as simple or elaborate as you want to make it. The important thing to remember is that clean, fresh water is an extremely attractive feature in a backyard bird habitat. It is far scarcer than food in most environments, and birds will often fly long distances to bathe and drink. Many species of birds that would not otherwise visit a backyard will do so if there is water.

If you want to observe birds close at hand, don't forget to wet your whistlers.



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