



## Best Native Plants to Feed Birds

Caterpillars are by far the number one source of food for baby birds. According to Dr. Doug Tallamy, Entomologist, University of Delaware, the most important insect in the food web is caterpillars, which are the food source for raising birds. If an area does not have the type of plants that provide the correct type and amount of insects (most especially caterpillars) to feed their young, birds will never nest in that area. Here is a list of the best plants to choose and the number of butterfly and moth species that they support.

### **Trees and Shrubs**

Oak (Quercus) 557: Red Oak, Bur Oak, White Oak, Swamp White Oak, Pin Oak, Black Oak, Chinkapin Oak. Oaks are native to our state and can grow in our area if located in the correct site with lower soil ph. The Oak most tolerant to higher soil ph is Chinkapin Oak, but Bur Oak, Red Oak and Swamp White Oak are somewhat adaptable to higher ph soils.

Willow (Salix) 380: Black Willow and Pussy Willow are both natives easily grown in this area and do very well with wetter soils that are near a body of water or sites that are poorly drained.

Pin Cherry, Black Cherry, Chokecherry, Canadian Plum (Prunus) 377: Any of these will host a wide variety of caterpillars and also feed birds with their fruit later in the season. They are considered a keystone plant in the ecosystem.

Birch (Betula) 358: There are several species of Birch trees in Wisconsin, but those most commonly sold as landscape trees are Paper Birch and River Birch. The River Birch is better adapted to heat and humidity than Paper Birch.

Poplar (Populus) 387: There are several native trees in this group, but most are not sold as landscape trees, such as Cottonwood. Quaking Aspen is a fast growing tree that has attractive white bark and grows where Paper Birch cannot thrive. It can sucker so keep the soil cool with a layer of mulch to reduce this tendency.

Maple (Acer) 297: Sugar Maple, Red Maple, Silver Maple, Mountain Maple. The first two species are sold in nurseries. Silver Maples are not good for smaller landscapes and heavy pavement. Mountain Maple requires acidic soil.

Blueberry, Cranberry (Vaccinium) 294: Here is a shrub group that everyone likes; birds and humans! The native Highbush Blueberry likes moist soil and they all need acidic soil.

Crabapple (Malus) 254: American Crabapple tree (*Malus coronaria*) and Prairie Crabapple (*Malus ioensis*). This is a small tree that matures at about 20-30 feet tall and wide. Unfortunately, they can be susceptible to leaf diseases and defoliate early because of this. All sorts of wildlife love the fruit of this tree.

Alder (*Alnus*) 233: Speckled Alder. An excellent small tree/shrub for wet areas, like stream banks, where it controls erosion and keeps water cool and clean for trout. It also fixes nitrogen to improve the soil for other plants. This will sucker and form thickets, so only plant where it has room to spread.

Pine (*Pinus*) 213: White Pine, Red Pine, Jack Pine. The best choice for landscapes is White Pine, which grows up to 80 feet tall and 40 feet wide. A beautiful tree that supports a large amount of Lepidoptera species and provides seeds for the birds plus nesting material.

Other native trees and shrubs of greater value for birds that you can use in your landscape are as follows:

Hickory (*Carya*): 186, Elm (*Ulmus*): 177, Hawthorn (*Crataegus*): 144, Berries (*Rubus*): 138, Basswood (*Tilia*): 133, Spruce (*Picea*): 126, Hazelnut (*Corylus*): 124, Rose (*Rosa*): 109, Walnut (*Juglans*): 119, Beech (*Fagus*): 112, Serviceberry (*Amelanchier*): 106, Dogwood (*Cornus*): 106, Fir (*Abies*): 101, Witch Hazel (*Hamamelis*): 60, Leadplant (*Amorpha*): 25, St. John's Wort (*Hypericum*): 18, Buttonbush (*Cephalanthus*): 17, Northern Bush Honeysuckle (*Diervilla*): 3, Black Chokeberry (*Aronia*).

## **Perennials**

The following plants are chosen for providing either insects, nectar or seeds. Some of these choices have all three, making them better than most. Be sure to look for each plant's site needs and if they are suited for your yard. Some may be too large for a small setting, spreading by roots or suckers.

Goldenrod (*Solidago*): 102 There are many species in this group, but not all are aggressive growers. Showy Goldenrod (*Solidago speciosa*) has a fibrous root system instead of a rhizomatous root system, therefore it can be used in a smaller landscape. To prevent self-seeding, deadhead the flowers after they are finished. These support a large number of insects of all sorts.

Strawberry (*Fragaria*): 68 Birds love the little berries and people do too (if you are lucky to get to them). A good groundcover for native areas from sun to shade, this will spread readily. They host several moth species.

Sunflower (*Helianthus*): 65 Very tall plants with bright yellow flowers in fall, they spread vigorously and are not suited for small landscapes. But if you have the space for them, they are great for seeds for migrating and winter birds.

Violet (Viola): 29 The common violet is the state flower for Wisconsin and a staple of wooded areas. A low growing groundcover, it is a larval host for several butterflies and a needed nectar source for spring pollinators. There are several native violets available in various color variations of purple, yellow and white.

Joe Pye Weed, Boneset (Eupatorium): 28 Almost all of the species in this group are tall, ranging from 5'-8' tall and have fibrous root systems. Mistflower is the exception, which is 2' tall and grows aggressively by rhizomes, so use it only in large settings. They all are butterfly feeding stations in the late summer into fall.

Lupine (Lupinus): 28 The plant that is host to the endangered Karner Blue Butterfly and other butterflies too, this 2' tall blue flower spike is a beautiful landscape plant for dry soils. It likes sandy soils and must have well drained soil to thrive. If you have a full sun site appropriate for this great plant, please add it to your landscape. Be very careful to NOT purchase the Western Lupine (Lupinus polyphyllus) which is often sold as 'Wild Lupine' incorrectly. The latter plants are invasive and are displacing our native species.

Wild Geranium (Geranium): 24 A must have for any part shade to full shade garden, it forms a nice mound of lavender blue flowers in late spring. It can even grow in full sun with consistent moisture, but the leaves may deteriorate later in the season. A dependable and deer resistant landscape plant. Several butterflies and many bees benefit from this plant.

Switchgrass (Panicum): 23 Switchgrass provides a valuable habitat for birds with shelter and seeds. This species of grass is better suited for smaller landscapes because it has fibrous roots (not rhizomes).

Ironweed (Veronia): 19 Common Ironweed is host to several butterflies and moths and an important food source for late season bees. They can reach 6' tall and an aggressive seeder, so remove spent flower heads to reduce self-seeding.

Rose Mallow (Hibiscus): 17 A 6' tall plant with large showy flowers that attract bees, butterflies, moths and hummingbirds. Rose Mallow is a wetland plant good to have near a pond or in a low area and will tolerate periodic flooding. Each bloom lasts for one day but the flowering continues for weeks.

Black Eyed Susan, Browneyed Susan, Coneflower (Rudbeckia): 16 All three bird essentials are here for you along with beautiful flowers to enjoy. Do not deadhead in order to keep seeds for the fall/winter season.

Evening Primrose (Oenothera): 15 There are several species in this category, but all need sandy, well drained soil. Biennials, Common Evening Primrose gets up to 6' tall, whereas Sand Evening Primrose is 2' tall. The beautiful pink Primrose Moth depends on the Common Evening Primrose and draws lots of other pollinators too.

Cattail (Typha): 15 The plant that marks a low area with standing water or pond edge, cattails are good erosion control, oxygenate the water and create an important bird habitat because of

their seeds. Goldfinches and other songbirds eat the seeds, use the fluff for nests and eat the caterpillars and other insects that also use this plant.

Meadow Rue (Thalictrum): 14 Purple Meadow Rue stands 6' tall with purple stems and delicate tassel flowers that wave in the breeze in early summer. It can grow in full sun to partial shade. Swallowtail butterflies are just one of the butterflies that you will attract to this plant.

Bluestem (Andropogon): 13 A statuesque grass that provides shelter and food for the birds, this does self seed and may not be suited for small yards.

Iris (Iris): 13 The native Blue Flag Iris and Wild Iris both attract Hummingbirds. They are great for pond edges or stream banks and can be in wet soils with up to 1' of standing water. Blue Crested Iris is a 6" shade plant that does not like wet soils, but is used by Hummingbirds and bees.

Milkweed (Asclepias): 12 Milkweeds are important food sources for Monarchs, but many other pollinators are also attracted to the nectar, including Hummingbirds. Choose from several types of milkweeds to fit your landscape, such as Rose Milkweed, Butterfly Milkweed.

Bee Balm (Monarda): 11 The Scarlet Bee Balm is best in sun, but Wild Bergamot handles some shade. These plants are great nectar sources for hummingbirds and insects. They also have seed later in the season for many birds. These plants are also rabbit and deer resistant.

Columbine (Aquilegia): 11 Easily grown in full sun to full shade, Columbine grows 1-3' tall. It likes leaner soil fertility and will get weak stems if it is grown in richer soils. A beautiful red/yellow flower in spring that provides nectar for hummingbirds when they return, along with several butterflies.

Vervain (Verbena): 11 There are a few different species native to our area and they have a high ecological value for wildlife. Bees, wasps, flies, butterflies and hummingbirds use this plant for nectar and many songbirds eat the seeds. The larvae of many different insects use this plant, providing food for baby birds. Hoary Vervain and Blue Vervain have blue/lavender flower spikes that open from the bottom up.

Beardtongue (Penstemon): 10 Smooth Penstemon and Hairy Beardtongue are two species that will grow in our area in full sun to part shade, but there are several others in this genus. All provide nectar for hummingbirds and pollinators in late spring to summer and are host plants for several butterflies. A deer and rabbit resistant choice for a landscape.

Aster (Symphyotrichum) : 8 There are a large number of native Asters for either sun or part shade and they all provide nectar for hummingbirds and pollinators plus seed for birds later in the season. Pick one that will grow in your landscape for late season color.

Blazing Star (Liatris): 8 Provide sandy soil and these plants will provide lots of nectar for butterflies, bees and hummingbirds. Meadow Blazing Star is a magnet for Monarchs and other butterflies!

Phlox (Phlox): 8 Another great plant with several species that hummingbirds will visit for the nectar. It hosts many insects including the rare Phlox Moth. Deer and rabbits also like to eat this plant, so protect it from browsing.

Clematis (Clematis): 8 Virgin's Bower is the native vine that grows in shady settings. Its white flowers brighten the summer months and it also has decorative seed heads. Visited by bees, wasps and flies, the 9' tall vines provide nesting sites for some birds.

Rattlesnake Master does not draw in butterflies or moths, but it has nectar for pollinators and seeds for birds. Unusual looking flowers in silvery blue are bristly and spherical and rabbits and deer do not like them. It is a host plant for Black Swallowtail.

Sage (*Salvia azurea*) is a great nectar source for hummingbirds, growing in sandy, well drained soils.

Tickseed (*Coreopsis*) supports insects plus provides nectar and seeds. There are several native species and all need sandy soils and will spread by seed and roots.

Other grasses that are good choices for seeds and shelter for birds are Side Oats Grama, Prairie Dropseed, Little Bluestem, Bottlebrush Grass and Indian Grass.

#### References:

- Planting Native to Attract Birds to Your Yard, by Sharon Sorenson
- Native Plant Finder website; [nwf.org](http://nwf.org)
- Prairie Nursery, Westfield, WI
- Prairie Moon Nursery, Winona, MN
- Johnson's Nursery, Menomonee Falls, WI

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