



WILDLIFE HABITAT



The Marion County Soil & Water Conservation District is a subdivision of state government and is funded primarily by the City of Indianapolis / Marion County government. The District works to assist county residents and others with a host of natural resource issues and concerns. These Conservation Fact Sheets are provided to assist people to better care for the land.



Why Create Wildlife Habitat?

Marion County continues to grow with more urban development. The urbanization of once rural areas is leading to decreased food, water, and shelter for wildlife. In providing these vital habitat components for our native fauna, homeowners can attract sources of beauty, relaxation, and inspiration. The calm of nature, the songs of birds, and the calls of frogs can provide a serene environment in which to find tranquility.

Steps to Create a Wildlife Habitat

In Your Yard:

1. Take inventory of your existing vegetation. Note the locations of plants and their condition, how much shade is provided, whether your plants are evergreen or deciduous, and if they provide any food (berries, nuts, nectar) for wildlife.
2. Sketch your yard, including plants, buildings, water sources, utilities, and pathways. Do any plants need removed due to inappropriate placement, lack of productivity, or undesirable appearance? Once you have decided which plants to keep, think about what to add. Does your yard need more sources of food, cover, or both? A diversity of trees, shrubs, and groundcovers can provide these necessities.
3. Add trees, shrubs, and groundcovers. You can do all of the planting at once, or make it an ongoing project. Native species are strongly recommended since they are already adapted to the soil, water, and weather conditions in our area. They will be more beneficial to wildlife and less maintenance to you.
4. Plant a variety of trees first. Keep in mind the eventual size of the tree, neighboring properties, and flowering or fruiting habit. Evergreen species will provide shelter all year-round. Fruit or nut-bearing trees will provide food. Furthermore, choosing a combination of plants that fruit during different seasons will provide a constant rotation of food sources.
5. Fill the understory with smaller, shade-tolerant trees and shrubs. Many of these species are colorful in the springtime, and provide berries for fall and winter feed.
6. Herbaceous plants can add color to your yard while attracting birds and butterflies. Plant shade-tolerant species under your trees and consider a native grass or wildflower garden in the sun. Don't worry about creating a perfectly symmetrical garden environment—nature is full of clumps and curves.



Watering Wildlife:

Water is another crucial element for wildlife. You can provide water in a simple saucer or birdbath, or create a more complex pond or wetland area. If using a saucer or birdbath, be sure to change the water every few days and make sure it does not stay frozen in the winter. Include logs and rocks in your pond for turtles, butterflies, and song-birds to use.

Marion County Soil and Water Conservation District (SWCD)

Attracting Birds:

- Bird species in Indiana are highly variable. Some are present year-round, while others migrate south for the winter. Some species nest in cavities while others prefer nesting on the ground. Food preference also differs among species, ranging from insects to nuts to berries.
- Consider leaving dead or dying trees in your yard, as long as they are not a safety hazard. This will provide cavities for birds to use, as well as habitat for small mammals and insects.
- Bird boxes also provide nesting sites. Boxes are usually built for specific species, so you can choose which birds you want to attract. Be sure to check for placement and maintenance instructions as well.
- If your vegetation does not provide enough food to support the birds you wish to attract, put out feeders. There are a variety of bird feeders and feeds to choose from, and most of them attract specific species of birds, so again, check these details before making a purchase. Cut fruit is also appealing to many species.
- Hummingbirds are unique in that they rely strictly on nectar as a food source. They are typically attracted to red and yellow tubular flowers, so plant a variety of these to attract the species. Hummingbird feeders can also be purchased, filled with sugar-water (1 part sugar to 4 parts water), and cleaned every 3-4 days.

Attracting Butterflies:

- There are approximately 150 species of butterflies in Indiana. They range in size from having a wingspan of one inch to a wingspan of six inches.
- Butterflies begin as larvae (caterpillars) and have very specific food habits. For example, Monarch larvae only feed on milkweed, so providing this food source is crucial. They then become pupae, and finally develop into colorful adults that feed on nectar and fruit juices. Plant a variety of fruit and nectar plants to provide for various species. Nectar feeders can also be used.
- Butterflies appreciate warm weather, so providing a stone or statue in your garden will give them an inviting place to bask.
- Water is just as important for butterflies as for other wildlife. A shallow dish of water or a depression in a rock that retains water should be sufficient.
- Be cautious in using pesticides—they can have detrimental effects on all stages of a butterfly's lifecycle.



Attracting Bats:

- Bats are very beneficial and interesting mammals. They are a wonderful insect control—some species catch up to 600 mosquitoes in one hour.
- Roosting habitat can be provided by erecting bat houses. The house should be placed at least 15 feet high in a spot that receives at least 4-6 hours of sun per day. Some species will be content using shrubs, trees, and cavities for roosting.

Attracting Amphibians and Reptiles:

- Toads, frogs, turtles, and snakes are also beneficial species—providing population control of many insects and rodents.
- These species are cold-blooded animals, so they require sunny basking areas to warm up during the morning. During the heat of the day, they require a shady, cool spot to rest and hide from predators.
- Basking areas can be provided as a pile of rocks, and shelter is as simple as planting groundcovers or allowing leaves to accumulate. Stumps and logs can also provide important habitat.

Attracting Mammals:

- Squirrels, chipmunks, skunks, raccoons, opossums, mice, and deer are usually abundant in urban areas and do not require specific action to be attracted. Furthermore, they can easily become pests due to their adaptability. Brush piles intended for amphibians and reptiles may be used by rabbits and mice. Food set out for birds may be eaten by any of these common species.
- To avoid unwanted encounters with these animals, avoid setting out food that may attract scavengers, such as raccoons. Keep garbage secure, check the exterior of your house for loose or rotten boards, and remember not to handle any wildlife—they may be dangerous.

More Resources:

- The Indiana Wildlife Federation provides a wildlife habitat certification program for homeowners, businesses, parks, and nearly any common area. This process approves a site as wildlife-friendly and awards the area with a certificate of recognition and a beautiful backyard sign to display. For more information, visit www.indianawildlife.org or call (317) 875-9453.
- If you are having a problem with wildlife, whether raccoons continue to ravage your trash or a goose has made a nest in your shrubs, contact the Indiana Department of Natural Resources at 1-800-893-4116.