

ON THE WILD SIDE

Discover the wild in your own backyard

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Families of Downy Woodpeckers and White-breasted Nuthatches are flitting around our backyard as I write today. I can't always tell the young birds from the parents, but I can get an idea by watching their behavior. Young birds often follow parents and are a little clumsy; sometimes they even miss a branch or the peg on the feeder.

My favorite behavior is the little quiver the young ones do when facing a parent and asking for attention or food. These young birds are following and mimicking their parents as they learn how to find their own food.

Each Nuthatch I see picks up a seed at the feeder and carries it to a tree branch where it tap, tap, taps with its sharp beak to get at the seed. The young Downy Woodpeckers are learning to eat insects hidden in crevices in the bark of the pine trees, and often eat seeds and suet from backyard feeders.

Food for birds and other wildlife is an important part of what makes a yard a great place to visit. Native plants like blueberries and other berry-bearing shrubs, flowers with nectar, and plants with nuts and cones provide many birds and small mammals with the nutrients they need. Insects and spiders that live on our plants provide food for birds and mammals and also constitute a part of the healthy diet for lizards, turtles, salamanders, toads and frogs.

Our backyard guests also need water. If you have a natural source of water like a stream or pond nearby, you are all set. If you border Norton Reservoir, Lake Winnecunnet or one of our rivers, you are very fortunate, too. If not, it is easy to supply water for wildlife. Birdbaths attract birds, and other animals enjoy them, too, such as chipmunks and insects. Dishes or birdbaths at ground level encourage toads and turtles to stop by.

Bushes and shrubs, small trees, and brush or log piles, can help wildlife hide when predators are nearby or if the weather is extreme. Last summer we watched a small hawk streak through our honeysuckle vine chasing a Black-capped Chickadee – it was an amazing sight! That chickadee survived by hiding in the thickest part of the vine.



The Land Preservation Society is working to have Norton certified as a Community Wildlife Habitat.

Bushes and shrubs may also provide a safe place to raise young. Some animals prefer branches high above ground, or burrows or dens in the ground. Fibers from last year's plants or new growth can serve as material for nests, and leaves and softer fibers are sometimes used to line nests and help to keep them clean.

Providing native plants and supporting healthy environmental conditions in your yard will help ensure that wildlife will thrive. Indeed, good practices will make the air, soil, and water, better for all of us, especially for kids and pets that are most likely to come into close contact with plants and soil. Reducing or eliminating use of insecticides, herbicides and fertilizers is helpful. There are organic and natural ways to help control pests that are better choices. These practices, along with cultivating native plants (collectively referred to as "sustainable gardening"), often turn out to require less work and less expense once the right decisions are made!

I have just described are the five criteria needed to get a yard certified by the National Wildlife Federation.

Certifying your own yard doesn't obligate you to do anything other than providing wildlife with some much-welcome help as development destroys and fragments their once abundant habitat.

The Land Preservation Society of Norton (LPS) seeks to get the town of Norton certified as a Community Wildlife Habitat; and we need a lot of yards certified to do this.

We are proud that Norton would be only the second town in Massachusetts to be certified, and that we are gathering our community to join together to preserve green spaces and protect our wildlife. Please join us. We call our project "The Wild Backyards of Norton." A simple application with items checked off in five categories and \$20 is all you need to make your yard a Certified Wildlife Habitat. (See NWF website below for application.) When 150 homes are certified and our team completes the other activities suggested, we will be able to get Norton certified as a COMMUNITY WILDLIFE HABITAT.

We plan to provide lots of help in this column every other week for those who want to protect and preserve habitat and wildlife, and to share stories and observations from The Wild Backyards of Norton.

For more information, see the Land Preservation Society of Norton website:
<http://www.nortonlandpreservation.org/>

Or go directly to the National Wildlife Federation website:
<http://www.nwf.org/In-Your-Backyard.aspx>

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