



THE BACKYARD

Build the Perfect Yard List

Ten tips to improving your list

One of the greatest pleasures I derive from being a bird watcher is the ability to study birds anywhere—including in my yard! I don't live in a special nature haven but in a city of almost 100,000 people. I do, however, have a "woody" yard, which I have modified and planted to be attractive to birds and other wildlife.

If you've decided to try this yard list thing, the first step is for you to establish the "rules" for your list. Since it is *your* yard list, you are totally in control here! For me, it's simple: Anything I see or hear from my yard is countable. This opens up a vast area of sky to allow for shorebirds, waterfowl, and hawks migrating overhead, in addition to birds that actually stop in the yard. You decide the criteria for your list. So, here are my 10 tips to build a great yard list.

GEOFFREY CARPENTIER

1. Location, Location, Location

We can't all live on Chesapeake Bay or the Salton Sea or in Point Pelee National Park; we have to make do with what we have. If you are choosing a new home, however, you have options. Choose a property that is bird friendly—lots of food, good cover, nesting sites, and water. If possible, look also for orientation and proximity to flyways between feeding areas and along migration routes, as many of the birds you record for your yard will be fly-overs only.

2. Plantings

A variety of plantings in your yard can help you attract more species of birds. You need low plantings for cover and food, taller ones for the birds to sally forth from to catch prey, to provide clear vantage points for spotting predators, and to serve



The author sitting outside in his bird-filled yard, making time for observations.

as singing perches. When I bought my house 12 years ago, the yard was nothing but an expanse of grass with an unkempt woodlot at the back. Now it is a wildlife haven, full of wildflowers and ornamental plantings. I tried for years to build one of those perfect perennial gardens one sees in the magazines, but I have learned I'm not very good at that, so I let nature make some choices for me. I try everything and see what survives, what the birds eat and ignore, and what is attractive to me and to my neighbors.

3. Food

A nice mix of plants will provide food throughout the growing season and even well into winter, especially if you leave everything standing

until early spring. Remnant seeds and berries can be eaten by whatever wildlife wants them. My neighbors chuckle every year as they see me cutting down the leftover plant stems in early March so the new spring growth won't be hampered. I'm the first gardener on the block every year! You can attract even more birds by supplementing their natural food with feeders. I keep a dedicated feeder filled with Nyjer seed for the finches, and I have a large feeding station filled on one side with black-oil sunflower seed, and on the other with mixed cracked corn, sunflower, and millet. A suet feeder hangs nearby. To top it off, my hummingbird feeder attracts these little denizens from early May to late September.