

## Gardening for Birds with Native Plants in Blackland Prairies

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Birds need food, water, shelter and places to raise young. This talk focuses on plants that provide food.

A great resource to determine if a particular plant will flourish in your yard is to check the online [Native Plant Database](https://www.wildflower.org/plants/) of the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center. <https://www.wildflower.org/plants/> Access the plant collection for [North Central Texas](#), and then put in filters such as dry soil, moist soil, sun conditions, etc.

Another database, still under development, and not totally accurate yet is the National Wildlife Federation [Native Plant Finder](https://www.nwf.org/NativePlantFinder/) <https://www.nwf.org/NativePlantFinder/> Database tells you what plant species in your zip code support lepidoptera (butterflies and moths) and/or are great at attracting bees.

Last, but certainly not least, visit the Native Plant Society of Texas [website](https://www.npsot.org/resources/native-plants/native-plants-database/) <https://www.npsot.org/resources/native-plants/native-plants-database/> which has plant lists by ecoregion. Put in the name of the plant you want, which will pull up that plant, and you can verify from the map and text that it is suitable for your region.

Keep in mind that all native plants contribute to the ecosystem, and even though one particular plant may not appear to directly benefit birds, there is most likely a connection between that plant and birds. For example, the plant may be a larval food plant for an insect as yet unidentified, or perhaps it is a nectar-rich source for tiny pollinators that are eaten by birds like hummingbirds and gnatcatchers.

**Keystone Plants** support high numbers of moths and butterflies (lepidoptera) and/or are very important to native bees and are food plants for lepidoptera caterpillars. Texas has 481 species of butterflies and 4700 moth species! These numbers vary by ecoregion.

"The research of entomologist, Dr. Doug Tallamy, and his team at the University of Delaware have identified 14% of native plants (the keystone species) support 90% of butterfly and moth lepidoptera species. The research of horticulturist Jarrod Fowler has shown that 15% to 60% of North American native bee species are pollen specialists who only eat pollen from 40% of native plants."

Keystone Plants by Ecoregion National Wildlife Federation <https://www.nwf.org/Native-Plant-Habitats/Plant-Native/Why-Native/Keystone-Plants-by-Ecoregion>

Lepidoptera are critical to nesting success for 96% of North American songbirds. It takes 6000 to 9000 caterpillars to raise one brood of chickadees, for example.

**Keystone** trees include but are not limited to Oaks (*Quercus* species), Cherry (*Prunus* sp.) such as Mexican Plum and Black Cherry, Willows (*Salix* sp.), Elms (*Ulmus* sp.), Cottonwood (*Populus* sp.)

**Keystone** bee plants are in the Astereaceae family, including those in the *Solidago* genus, e.g., goldenrods, as well as sunflowers (*Helianthus* genus), and Texas Aster (*Symphotrichum* genus.)

Gardening for birds, in large part, is gardening for insects, so pesticides are counter-productive. They do harm directly, poisoning birds, and indirectly by reducing insect populations that many bird species rely on, at the very least to feed their young. Leaf litter is critical to the survival of insects including butterfly and moth pupa that may overwinter in it. Read more [here](https://xerces.org/blog/leave-leaves-to-benefit-wildlife).

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## Native plants to consider

**What do birds eat?** It depends on the species. Invertebrates, nectar, sap, fruits and berries, nuts and seeds, foliage and buds, and vertebrates such as amphibians, reptiles, fish, mammals and other birds.

**Invertebrates** – examples of lepidoptera food plants are Passionvines (*Passiflora genus*) Natives include *P. lutea*, and *P. incarnata*

**Nectar**- Coral Honeysuckle vine (*Lonicera sempervirens*), Crossvine (*Bignonia capreolata*), Turk's Cap (*Malvaviscus arboreus var. drummondii*), Texas Lantana (*Lantana horrida*), Mexican Buckeye (*Ungnadia speciosa*), Red Buckeye (*Aesculus pavia*), Mealy Blue Sage (*Salvia farinacea*), other Salvias, Texas Mountain Laurel (*Sophora secundiflora*, now *Dermatophyllum secundiflorum*),

**Sap** – oaks, mesquites, elms, etc. Sap can sustain some birds in cold weather, and traps insects.

**Fruits/berries** –Aromatic Sumac (*Rhus aromatica*), Ilex species– Yaupon (*Ilex vomitoria*) and Possumhaw, (*Ilex decidua*), American Beautyberry (*Callicarpa americana*), Chile Pequin (*Capsicum annuum*), Eastern Red Cedar (Blacklands) or Ashe Juniper (Hill Country) Carolina Buckthorn

**Nuts/seeds** – Salvias like Lyre-leaf (*S. lyrata*), Tropical Sage (*S. coccinea*), Azure Sage (*S. azurea*). Note that the Salvias are both seed and nectar sources. Composites like Maximilian Sunflower (*Helianthus maximiliani*) and Zexmenia (*Wedelia acapulcensis var. hispida*) are excellent in full sun. Some trees like fall blooming Cedar Elm (*Ulmus crassifolia*) have samaras, which are their seeds. Acorns have tremendous food value. Grasses provide seeds.

**Foliage/Buds**- Plateau Goldeneye (*Viguiera dentata*), and Turk's Cap (*Malvaviscus arboreus var. drummondii*) are enjoyed by Lesser Goldfinches. Cedar Waxwings eat many leaf buds.

**Vertebrates**- Various bird species eat amphibians, reptiles, mammals, fish, and other birds.

## Provide shelter for birds (and their prey)

Provide vertical niches of habitat such as canopy, mid-story, understory and groundcovers.

Understory provides place for caterpillars to pupate and ground is less compacted.

Understory gives places for birds to forage undetected and provides nest sites.

Provide evergreens for shelter when possible to block the wind and for nest sites.

Vines can be used as nest sites. Virginia Creeper (*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*) provides berries too.

Leave dead trees for cavity nesters.

Birds need nest materials. For example, leave sticks and twigs. Don't put out clothes dryer lint or string.

**Grasses** are important as building blocks of nests and for the seeds they provide. They can also be shelter for some bird species. Consider Big Muhly aka Lindheimer's Muhly and any of the gramas.

Weedy plants are often great for birds- examples are Hackberry berries, Frostweed, Ragweed and Pokeberry/Pokeweed (*Phytolacca Americana*). Support local wildlands that allow these plants to grow.

In sum, it is important to provide water, food timed for birds' needs through the seasons, shelter and places for birds to raise their young. Providing for birds helps support other wildlife.

## Other great bird plants for the Blackland Prairie

- Any of the bluestems like Little and Bushy provide seeds and nest material
- Southwestern Bristlegrass, *Setaria scheelei* – small seeds popular with buntings like Painted and Indigo. It is available from [Native American Seed](#).
- Texas thistle, *Cirsium texanum* – seeds are very popular with goldfinches.
- Standing Cypress, *Ipomopsis aggregata* – biennial, nectar that attracts hummingbirds, and seeds
- Late Boneset [Eupatorium serotinum](#) – Somewhat similar to White Mistflower, *Ageratina havanensis* of the Hill Country, this perennial has pretty white flowers that set seed that is popular with small birds like Lesser Goldfinches. Part shade. Blooms in fall. White Mistflower attracts many butterflies and I bet this one will too. Lesser Goldfinches do eat the leaves of White Mistflower.
- White Snakeroot [Ageratina altissima](#) is similar to the above eupatorium and probably has the same value to birds. Deciduous perennial.
- Roughleaf Dogwood, *Cornus drummondii* – a tree/shrub with white berries. It does sucker.
- Texas Persimmon, *Diospyros texana* – small tree fruits sought after by birds and mammals.
- Red Mulberry, *Morus rubra* – large tree whose fruit is very attractive to many birds during spring migration. Birds like Swainson's Thrush, Veery, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, American Robin and Cedar Waxwings flock to the berries, but smaller birds also enjoy them, often eating fallen berries.
- Cherry Laurel, *Prunus caroliniana* – an evergreen shrub with glossy leaves, and berries that are popular with birds. If they find yours, you may have volunteer Cherry Laurels popping up.
- Mexican Plum, *Prunus mexicana* – has fall plums, and is a popular pollinator plant in spring.
- Black Cherry, *Prunus serotina* var. *serotina* – tall tree with cherries for later spring migrants.
- Carolina Buckthorn, *Rhamnus caroliniana* – Glossy-leaved small tree with berries in fall/winter.
- Flameleaf Sumac, *Rhus copallinum* var. *lanceolata* – berries popular with birds that winter here like Cedar Waxwings, but also residents like Ladder-backed Woodpeckers. Stunning fall color.
- Elbowbush, *Forestiera pubescens* – an underutilized deciduous shrub that is a good understory layer for birds to forage in. Female plants have berries for birds. Hummingbirds perch in it.
- Coralberry, *Symphoricarpos orbiculatus* – a deciduous shrub that spreads and is good for erosion control. Berries eaten by birds often when they fall to the ground, where they can be eaten unobserved.
- Pigeonberry, *Rivina humilis* – a perennial, low to medium high ground cover. May disappear in hot weather but will come back. It has berries.

### Resources to learn more

- Books by Douglas Tallamy such as **The Nature of Oaks**, **Nature's Best Hope**, and **Bringing Nature Home**.
- Travis Audubon Plant Lists – [Visit https://trisaudubon.org/bird-friendly-communities](https://trisaudubon.org/bird-friendly-communities) and scroll down the page to find the pdf of the recommended plants for birds and for hummingbirds for Travis County.
- An excellent place to buy native plants is the non-profit Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Center at their spring and fall plant sales.