

For the Love of Birds, Butterflies and Wildlife

By Jane Morse, University of Florida/IFAS Manatee County Extension Agent

Imagine that you have been traveling for hundreds of miles under your own power (no gas-powered vehicle). You are hungry, thirsty and in need of a safe place to rest. You have made this journey before and you know where there is a great place that has food, water and shelter. You arrive at the spot, but everything is gone. No food, no water, no rest. For miles and miles now, it is a barren wasteland of concrete, and strange plants that have no food. Exhausted you fall to the ground and can't go on. Death awaits.

Unknowingly, we are sentencing our wildlife to death. We destroy their habitat (their grocery store, restaurant, motel and drinking water). In their desperate search for food, water and shelter, many are killed on our roads, or killed by our pets, or perish because they can't get the necessities of life. Wildlife is suffering and dying because of us. According to Audubon's recent study comparing bird numbers from 1966 with 2003, 49% of species were found to be in decline! Grassland birds are in the most trouble, with 23 of 27 species in decline.

We CAN do something to help our wildlife. Probably the most important is to re-establish habitat for them in our own yards. Use plants that produce food (berries, nuts, nectar) and provide cover (densely branched, thorns, dead trees). Using native plants replenishes Florida habitat. These plants have evolved here for thousands of years and they have co-evolved with our other Florida wildlife species. When native plants are placed in the correct habitat, they can survive on the normal amount of rainfall (after they are established) and Florida's low soil fertility.

Provide other places for animals to hide and nest, such as bird or bat houses. Leave dead trees (snags) for them. If safety is a concern, dead trees can be cut off at about 15 feet. This will still be very valuable to wildlife. A brush pile in the back corner of the yard will provide excellent cover and feeding opportunities for small mammals, birds and butterflies, especially when placed near other vegetation.

Decrease the amount of mowed lawn. Lawns are like concrete to most animals. They supply very little food or cover (unless you're a chinch bug or mole cricket). So use lawn only where it is needed for erosion control or high use areas.



It's much better to use insecticidal soaps, horticultural oils, pruning, picking, or washing off insects rather than using broad-spectrum pesticides. Hard pesticides can harm or kill wildlife. Most of the insects in our landscapes are either beneficial (they eat pest insects) or harmless. Many birds eat insects and their babies require insects for survival. So leave the insects for the birds to eat.

Provide wildlife with a water source such as a pond, fountain, or bird bath. Change the water in bird baths every 3 days so mosquitoes won't breed. Keep them clean with a scrub brush.

Manage pets. Dogs and cats can drastically impact wildlife. Cats are extremely good hunters and their small size, agility and speed are a lethal combination for the small animals and birds on which they prey. Scientists estimate that cats are responsible for killing hundreds of millions of birds and possibly more than a billion small mammals in the U.S. each year! Keep cats indoors for their own safety, as well as for wildlife safety.

For more information on landscaping for wildlife, or getting your yard certified as a Backyard Landscape for Wildlife, call your local Master Gardeners at the Manatee County Extension Service (an "extension" of the University of Florida/IFAS). Master Gardeners are available Monday-Friday from 9 AM to 4 PM and can be reached by calling 722-4524. Visit our website at <http://manatee.ifas.ufl.edu>