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HABITAT - the arrangement of food, water, cover, and space -**IS THE KEY!** This newsletter is a place to share ideas, information, and help answer some of your habitat and wildlife gardening concerns.

We want to hear from you! Letters, e-mail, photos, drawings. Let us know how successful you are as you create wildlife habitat on your property. Complete the online [Habichat Reader's Survey](#).

Write to Me!

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Native Plant Profile...Gray Birch (*Betula populifolia*)

- **Grows to 30 foot tall, often with multiple trunks.**
- **Widely distributed in northeastern woodlands in sunny sites.**
- **Tolerates sterile sites and dry to wet soils.**
- **The bark does not peel as much as Paper Birch (*Betula papyrifera*) but used by birds as nest materials.**
- **Invades old fields and burned– over sites.**
- **Provides cavity sites.**

Common Names: poverty birch, fire birch, old field birch

Flowers/Fruits: Small flowers on catkins mid – April to May. Small flat nutlets inside cones early September to mid-October. Nutlets persist into winter.

Landscape Notes: Beautiful yellow autumn color and interesting bark patterns similar to paper birch though not as white. Hardy, fast growing and graceful in form. Trunks resilient to breakage from snow and ice. Tends to grow multiple trunks divided at the base. Best planted in the spring. Do not prune in the spring when the sap is running.

Other Birches: River Birch (*Betula nigra*) tolerates wet soil conditions and is common throughout the southeast. Sweet Birch (*Betula lenta*) may live to be 200 years old, while most birches are short lived. Was also the source of flavoring for birch beer prior to artificial flavorings for the soda.

Birches are larva host plants for: Mourning Cloak, Tiger Swallowtail and Compton Tortoiseshell butterflies and a host of moth larva including Io, Polyphemus, Promethea and Cecropia moths.

Birches are shelter for: American Woodcock, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Hairy and Downy Woodpeckers, Tufted Titmouse, White-breasted Nuthatch, Solitary Vireo, Baltimore Oriole.

Birches are nesting sites (S) or provide nest materials (N) for: Yellow-bellied Sapsucker (S) Hairy and Downy Woodpecker (S), Tufted Titmouse (S), White-breasted Nuthatch (S), Solitary, White-eyed, and Philadelphia Vireos (N), American Redstart (N), Baltimore Oriole (S), Scarlet Tanager (N)

Birches provide food for many species of wildlife: Green winged Teal, Wood Duck, Bufflehead, Turkey, Ruffed Grouse, Ring-necked Pheasant, Great Blue Heron, Yellow-bellied Sapsucker, Blue jay, Tufted Titmouse, White-breasted and Red-breasted nuthatch, Cedar Waxwing, Northern Cardinal, Rose-breasted Grosbeak, Purple Finch, Common Redpoll, Pine Siskin, American Goldfinch, Red and White –winged crossbill, Northern Junco, Tree and Fox sparrows, Beaver, Deer, Eastern Cottontail Rabbit, Porcupine.

Cultivars of Gray Birch you may find commercially: “Laciniata”, ”Pendula”- has drooping branches, “Purpurea”- Young leaves are purple

Native Plant Profile...Gray Birch (*Betula populifolia*)



Gray Birch Flower



Gray Birch Bark



Gray Birch Twig



Paper Birch Bark



Gray Birch Leaf

Maryland Wildlife: Flying Squirrels



Northern Flying Squirrel
(*Glaucomys sabrinus*)



Southern Flying Squirrel
(*Glaucomys volans*)

Range: Flying squirrels are found in forests of Eastern North America, with the Northern Flying Squirrel (*Glaucomys sabrinus*) found in coniferous forests and Southern Flying Squirrels (*Glaucomys volans*) in deciduous forests. The two species overlap in some parts of the Northeastern U.S. When this occurs, the southern species is more aggressive and will dominate. Home range averages from one to five acres.



Habitat: Southern Flying Squirrels require mast-producing trees such as oaks and hickories for food. They also need tree cavities in dead or live trees for shelter and to raise their young. Woodpeckers originally make cavities that flying squirrels often use. Flying squirrels prefer entrance holes larger than 1" in diameter. The nest is lined with shredded bark or leaves, sometimes feathers or moss are included. Flying squirrels often have two nest sites: one that is used constantly and one used as a refuge if the first nest is being disturbed. Southern flying squirrels will also use leaf nests in the southern part of their range.

Appearance: The Southern flying squirrel is identified by its small size. Both species of squirrels have a fold of skin that extends from the wrist of the front leg to the ankle of the hind leg. When the legs are extended, this allows the creature to glide from tree to tree. The furry, flattened tail acts a rudder during the glides. Eyes are large, which aids its nocturnal habits. Whiskers and ears are prominent.

The Northern flying squirrel is slightly larger. Its fur is a darker brown, with its belly fur gray at the base compared to the Southern flying squirrel's belly fur, which is white at the base. Southern flying squirrels are about 9" from the nose to tip of the tail. The upper body is brown to grayish brown, with creamy –white belly fur. It weighs 2 to 4 ounces. Fur of both species is soft and silky.

Habits/ Behavior: Northern flying squirrels mate in late winter, while the Southern flying squirrel mates in early spring. The Northern species has one litter per year while its southern counterpart will have a second litter in August/September. Both species give birth to 2 –5 young after a 10 to 11 day gestation. Newborns are weaned after 60 days and will stay with the female until she breeds again. The Southern flying squirrel will remain in its nest in very cold weather and will enter a sleep – like state called torpor, but not hibernation. The squirrels will glide from one tree to another. Northern flying squirrels will spend time on the ground feeding, but not the southern species. Both species of squirrels will chirp, which sounds like warblers. Southern flying squirrels will often use a specific den site for defecation. In the winter flying squirrels will den together in groups to conserve warmth.



Food: Northern flying squirrels feed on lichen and fungi as well as nuts, seeds insects and will store food for the winter. The Southern flying squirrel feeds on nuts, seeds, berries, small birds, their young, eggs and insects. They will also gnaw maple trees and drink their sap. Known for putting away large quantities of nuts for winter.

Predators: Owls, fox, weasels and house cats are the primary predators.

Additional comments: Because flying squirrels are nocturnal and secretive, they have not been studied as extensively as daytime squirrels. Flying squirrels will use nest boxes designed for gray squirrels and often songbird nest boxes.

Songbirds in Your Meadows



Maryland has only nine species of truly grassland birds:

The Upland Sandpiper

Horned Lark

Eastern Meadowlark

Dickcissel

Bobolink

Savannah Sparrow

Grasshopper Sparrow

Henslow's Sparrow

Vesper Sparrow



We all enjoy watching colorful songbirds like Cardinals and Blue Jays that come to our bird feeders and fly about our yards, but the birds found in Maryland meadows can be equally worth the watching.

These birds typically live in large grasslands (usually greater than ten acres) and nest on the ground. In fact Maryland has only nine species of truly grassland birds: The Upland Sandpiper, Horned Lark, Eastern Meadowlark, Dickcissel, Bobolink, and several sparrows including the Savannah Sparrow, Grasshopper sparrow, Henslow's Sparrow, and Vesper Sparrow. You may not see these birds in your backyard but you might find them in your local school's playground, at the airport, on a nearby farm, or along a country roadside.

Grassland birds are unique and interesting in their own right. The Bobolink looks like it is wearing a tuxedo on backwards singing a bubbling call while in flight. The Grasshopper Sparrow's insect-like call accounts for its name. And, the Vesper Sparrow is known for its evening song, at vesper time.

Grassland birds usually are hard to spot because of their brown coloration and ability to melt into their grassy background. But one, the Eastern Meadowlark, has a vibrant yellow chest and throat set off by a black necklace, and its tail flashes white when it flies atop a fencepost to emit its call.

Songbirds in Your Meadows

Some species are very rare like the Henslow's Sparrow and the Upland Sandpiper, while others are widespread in Maryland like the Horned Lark. The Horned Lark and Vesper Sparrow like short, sparsely vegetated fields and pastures, while the Savannah and the Grasshopper Sparrows and Meadowlarks and Bobolinks like moderately tall thick meadows.

Some of our grassland birds have been declining in numbers in recent years, particularly the Meadowlark, Grasshopper Sparrow, and Vesper Sparrow. The reasons for these declines are related to the loss of habitat to development, the decline of the dairy industry and its associated hayfields and the increase of intensive row crop agriculture with its dependence on chemicals.

Historically, the stronghold for grassland birds was in the Midwest prairies, not Maryland forests. However the loss of prairie habitat has forced grassland birds to push into new areas. Reclaimed strip mines in western Maryland represent extremely important habitat for Maryland's grassland bird populations.



Landowners can help these birds by maintaining large areas of meadow habitat on their properties. If you are an urban or suburban landowner this may be impossible, but smaller meadow habitats can be extremely beneficial to butterflies. Be sure to investigate town and county mowing ordinances in the planning stages of your meadow as laws vary.

Another way concerned landowners can help grassland birds is by urging county governments to leave roadsides unmown. Farmers can also help by delaying the mowing of hayfields until mid-July to give these ground nesting birds time to raise their young. Or better yet, farmers can retire an area of cropland and plant it in native warm season grasses and wildflowers, which is aesthetically pleasing to us and highly beneficial to wildlife species.

So take some time in the spring and summer to listen and look for these unique birds of our fields.

Note: Habichat thanks Scott A. Smith, a biologist with DNR's Heritage Program, who originally wrote on this subject.



Helping Migrant Songbirds Survive



Bird migration can be inspirational and mysterious. In Maryland, this biannual event can feature “kettles” of hawks soaring over mountains or swirling masses of shorebirds on Assateague Island. Few events, however, can compare to songbird migration.

Each year, beginning in mid July, millions of songbirds in North America head southward. Neotropical migrants, birds that breed in North America but winter in the Caribbean or Central and South America, represent by far, the largest group of songbirds that nest or occur in Maryland during migration. Common Maryland backyard nesters include Gray Catbird,

Yellow Warbler, Ruby-throated Hummingbird, Barn Swallow, Baltimore Oriole, Chipping Sparrow, and Indigo Bunting. However most neotropical migrants are forest dwellers that need large, unbroken forests. Sadly, these birds and their habitat on their breeding, migratory stopovers and wintering areas are disappearing.

In addition to offering fruit, seed and suet at feeders, a yard landscaped for wildlife can help these birds while on migration.

Planting trees and shrubs of varying heights to mimic forest conditions in your yard is a good way to appeal to many birds. Blackburnian Warblers are treetop feeders that glean insects from the tops of tall trees. Red-eyed Vireos glean insects on foliage in the middle, while Black-and-White Warblers find insects on tree trunks and large branches. Planting pitch or loblolly pine trees may attract Pine Warblers or Bay-breasted Warblers.

Insects attracted to **wildflower meadows** may provide food for Palm Warblers or Common Yellowthroats. A Purple Martin house or a clothesline may provide a feeding perch for flycatching birds like the Eastern Phoebe and Eastern Kingbird.

An excellent method of attracting neotropical migrants includes water, which can be as easy as hanging a **drip bucket over a bird bath**. Be sure to place a lid over the drip bucket to prevent drownings. See: [Water Drips for Wild Places](#)

In a residential sea of treeless, manicured lawns , a yard that provides at least some of these habitat ingredients can be an oasis to an exhausted migrant. However, it is important to remember that suburban areas can never replace the undeveloped habitat that once existed for songbirds during migration. We tend to think of neotropical migrants as “our” birds since they raise their young here, Yet, a typical neotropical migrant spends less than half of its life in North America and the remainder in their tropical winter homeland. They are in fact part of our international wildlife heritage and remind us that local actions can have global effects.

Note: Habichat would like to thank Jim McCann , zoologist with our Heritage Program for the original work on this.

If you enjoyed this issue of Habichat, you might want to check out our online back issues and clickable listing of Habichat articles.

<http://www.dnr.state.md.us/wildlife/wildacres.asp#habichat>

Acknowledgements:

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 - Photograph of Southern Flying Squirrel in flight, courtesy of UWSP Student Chapter of the Wildlife Society, University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point
 - Photograph of Southern Flying Squirrel on branch, courtesy of John White
 - Photograph of Southern Flying Squirrel on ground, courtesy of UWSP Student Chapter of the Wildlife Society, University of Wisconsin, Stevens Point
 - Photograph of Eastern Meadow Lark courtesy of USGS
 - Photograph of Dickcissel, courtesy of Steve Maslowski, USFWS
 - Photograph of Bobolink courtesy of Pennsylvania Game Commission Photo/Joe Kosack
 - Photographs of Migrant Songbird Habitat, courtesy of USDA, CREP Program
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Here is a listing of phone numbers, web sites and organizations that you might find helpful or interesting in your search for ideas to manage your wild acres. **DNR Online...** Inspired by nature! www.dnr.maryland.gov

Project FeederWatch is a winter-long survey of birds that visit feeders at backyards, nature centers, community areas, and other locales in North America. FeederWatchers periodically count the highest numbers of each species they see at their feeders from November through early April. FeederWatch helps scientists track broadscale movements of winter bird populations and long-term trends in bird distribution and abundance. Project FeederWatch is operated by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology in partnership with the National Audubon Society, Bird Studies Canada, and Canadian Nature Federation. <http://birds.cornell.edu/pfw>

National Wildlife Federation - Details on their backyard habitat program www.nwf.org or call them at 1-800-822-9919.

Native plants - **The Maryland Native Plant Society** offers information dedicated to protecting, conserving and restoring Maryland's native plants and habitats, visit them at www.mdflora.org.

Maryland Cooperative Extension offers home and garden information, tips publications, plant problems, Bay issues, and other links at www.agnr.umd.edu/MCE/index.cfm Their **Home and Garden Information** number is statewide and can be reached at 1-800-342-2507, and from outside Maryland at 1-410-531-1757.

Bioimages, a project of Vanderbilt University, provides educational information to the public on biologically related topics, as well as a source of biological images for personal and non-commercial use. <http://bioimages.cas.vanderbilt.edu/>

Maryland's "**Becoming an Outdoors - Woman Program**" - One of the topics covered in the three-day workshops is Backyard Wildlife. For more information on this program contact Karina Blizzard at 410-260-8559 or send e-mail to: kblizzard@dnr.state.md.us.

For a free wildlife & native plant newsletter, visit the **WindStar Wildlife Institute** at www.windstar.org and subscribe to the WindStar Wildlife Garden Weekly e-newsletter. You can also visit this website to learn how you can become a certified wildlife habitat naturalist.

For more information on butterflies - visit the **North American Butterfly Association** at www.naba.org

Warm season grasses and wild meadows for upland nesting birds visit **Pheasants Forever** at www.pheasantsforever.org or e-mail: pf@pheasantsforever.org

In an effort to continue to provide quality backyard habitat information we are asking our readers to tell us what you think. Please take a few minutes to answer our survey. This will help us to improve our site so we can continue to deliver the information you want.

[Habichat Reader's Survey](#)

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