



Habitat Tips: Owl-Friendly Backyards

April 16, 2021

Owls are captivating creatures, and it is no surprise that many people would love to have them visit their backyard landscapes! As predators, owls depend on having healthy food webs, so it is important to think about the big picture to properly support owls in your home habitats.

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1. **Keep Big Trees.** Owls need trees, especially big ones that are dead and/or have holes in them. These are needed for nesting and food. Pines, beeches, and oaks usually are preferred trees. Standing dead trees (aka [snags](#)) are great for food, for roost spots, and sometimes even for nests. If the snag is not a threat to people, pets, or property then consider leaving it up for wildlife.



Barred owl chicks peeking from an American beech tree by Darryn DeShong, DNR Photo Contest

2. **Plant Native Species.** While all of our owl species in Maryland are carnivorous, you have to be able to support organisms they eat to support owls. A healthy food web begins with native plants that support invertebrates and beyond. Eastern Screech Owls will feed on invertebrates like moths and beetles as well as small rodents and birds. They also will likely feast upon this year's cicada emergence.
3. **Skip the Rodenticides.** In 2008, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) made the first moves to limit the use of rodenticides that caused secondary poisoning in raptors like hawks and owls. These poisons don't work right away, and poisoned rodents can be easily snagged by hungry owls. As the owls ingest the mice, the poisons build up in their bodies causing issues like internal bleeding. While the problematic rodenticides are not available for general consumer use, many can still be sold to pest professionals and for agricultural purposes. Because of this, it is up to you to be a wise consumer to look for alternatives. Please check out the Safe Rodent Control Resource Center for more information.

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Eastern screech owl in nest box by Tim Lenz CC by 2.0

Put Up Nest Boxes. In addition to providing natural nesting sites, nest boxes can also be put up for screech and barn owls. It is important to make sure the dimensions and placement are correct and that boxes are cleaned every year. Cornell's [Right Bird, Right House website](#) is a fantastic resource to learn about the best practices, dimensions, and materials to use for owl houses. One thing to consider is that owls are territorial, so don't place a box near a spot where there will be human traffic (both foot and by car).

5. **Reduce Light Pollution.** While lights in backyards at night may make it easier for owls to find food, some research suggests that prey species (like rodents) may change their behaviors if light is present. Check out [Florida's Wildlife Lighting website](#) for more information on how to reduce light pollution impacts to wildlife.
6. **Practice Owl-Etiquette.** Always respect wildlife's need for space and pay attention if they seem to be giving off stress cues. You may be too close. During breeding season, many wildlife species get territorial which is understandable. They need more space at this time and may abandon their nests if they feel too threatened.
7. **Keep Cats Indoors.** Many of our owl species eat rodents and small mammals like shrews. Outdoor cats can decimate local bird and small mammal populations, reducing food sources for natural predators like owls. Furthermore, outdoor cats can be a hazard to young owls (aka fledglings) as they build up their flight muscles on the ground. Help cats and owls by keeping cats indoors.
8. **Support Research.** Keep track of who visits your yard AND collect data for science by keeping an eBird yard list. Check out Cornell Lab of Ornithology's [Ebirding from Home](#) article for more information. If using eBird, consider joining the [MD-DC Breeding Bird Atlas](#) to document local breeding birds.

Finally, keep in touch! Let me know if you have any questions about local birds or how to attract them. I also would love to see any of your backyard owl photos!

Happy Spring HabiChat fans!

After what seems like the longest winter, I am happy to see signs of spring popping up in my local landscape. The queen bumblebees have emerged from their winter slumber. The ruby-throated hummingbirds are beginning to migrate back to Maryland. The trees are all starting to leaf out. So much is happening right now!

One big event slated for Maryland this year is the emergence of Brood X, the 17 year periodical cicadas. Learn more about these fascinating critters, what to expect, and their benefits with this season's article on cicadas.

Spring is also a great time to add native plants to your garden! This edition of Habichat features golden ragwort, a native perennial which lights up gardens with a pop of yellow this time of year. Check out the [Maryland Native Plant Society website](#) for a list of local nurseries that supply native plants. This time of year is also a great one to tackle some of the invasive plants that may have found their way into your yard. Check out the [Plant Invaders of Mid-Atlantic Natural Areas](#) for information on common invaders and how to properly remove them.

This edition of HabiChat also includes an article on how to make your backyard owl friendly as well as a few new backyard books for 2021 and small blurbs on young wildlife in the garden and the current salmonella outbreak with feeders.

Finally, don't forget to check out our [Wild Acres webinar series](#). Each month, we feature different topics relating to Maryland's wildlife and natural resources. In June, we'll have guest speakers from the University of Maryland Extension and Calvert County to speak on topics such as forest succession and American kestrels.

Happy Habitats,

Kerry Wixted

[Click here](#) to have HabiChat—the quarterly backyard wildlife habitat newsletter from the [Wild Acres](#) program—delivered right to your inbox!

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