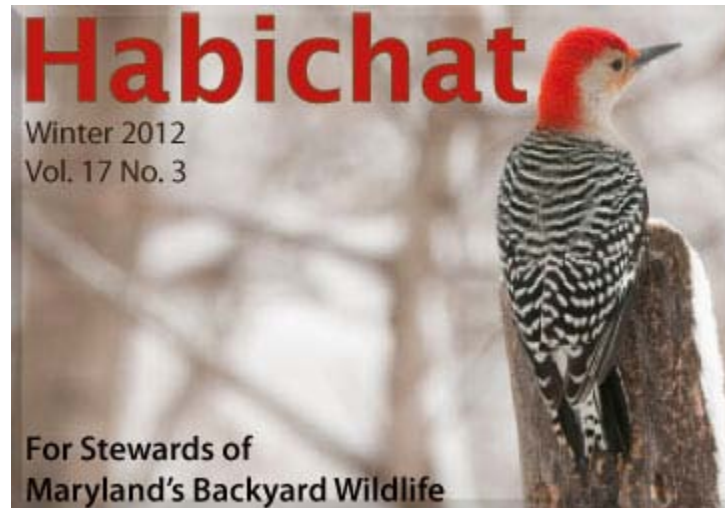


Maryland's Wild Acres



HABITAT - the arrangement of food, water, cover, and space - IS THE KEY.

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**Native Plant Profile.....White Oak
(*Quercus alba*)**



White oak leaves by: J.S. Peterson @ USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database

The white oak is truly a magnificent species which is why Maryland may have decided to adopt it as its official state tree. The most well known white oak in Maryland is the former Wye oak, which was estimated to be 500 years old before a 2002 thunderstorm caused it to fall. At its death, the tree's circumference was over 31 feet, and the whole tree weighed over 61,000 pounds. You can read more about the history of the Wye Oak [here](#).

White oaks are long-lived trees that can get up to 150 feet tall. They are named for their bark which appears whitish between thick ridges. White oaks have glossy, bright green leaves which have 5-7 rounded lobes. These leaves alternate around grayish stems. Like all oaks, white oaks have multiple buds clustered on the ends of their branches. These buds tend to be reddish brown and rounded.



White oak catkins by: R.A. Seelig
U.S. National Herbarium Plant Image Collection

Oaks produce two types of flowers in the spring. While their flowers aren't particularly showy to people, they are attractive to several species of invertebrates. The male flowers, also known as catkins, are greenish in color



White oak acorns, photo by Steve J. Baskauf, University of Wisconsin- Stevens Point

and are in clusters that droop down, allowing wind to distribute the pollen. Female flowers are reddish green and are found in small, single spikes by the leaves.

Around the age of 50, white oaks begin producing acorns (also known as mast) which are palatable to 80 different species of wildlife. White oak acorns are slightly sweeter than red oak acorns; so many species of wildlife prefer white oak acorns.

Mammals that enjoy white oak acorns include white-tailed deer, gray squirrels, fox squirrels, flying squirrels, mice, voles, rabbits, raccoons, opossums, gray foxes and red foxes. Birds that feed on acorns include wild turkey, bobwhite quail, wood ducks, mallards, woodpeckers, crows and jays. At one time, Native Americans also ground white oak acorns into a fine flour used for baking.

In addition to providing valuable food resources, white oaks are also economically important. White oaks are hardwoods that have a fine, almost watertight grain valued for construction and furniture making. In fact, the U.S.S. Constellation housed in the Baltimore Inner Harbor is made out of white oak!

Maryland Native Wildlife Red-bellied Woodpeckers



Photo of Male Red-bellied Woodpecker
by D. Brezinski, USFWS

With a red swatch of feathers on its neck and black and white checkered wings, Red-bellied woodpeckers can bring a lot of color to your backyard. Red-bellied woodpeckers are medium-sized woodpeckers that produce a shrill, rolling *kwirr* or *churr* noise. Males tend to have a red “crown” that extends down the nape of their neck (see photo on right) while females just have red feathers on their neck (see photo below). They are common woodpeckers which can be found throughout Maryland.

Red-bellied woodpeckers can be found throughout deciduous forests in the state. They nest in dead and dying tree cavities. Red-bellied woodpeckers breed April-July. After the female lays her eggs, both she and the male will take turns incubating the eggs. Typically, the male incubates the eggs at night. After about three weeks, the eggs will hatch and the young will take another month before they fledge. The chicks will stay with their parents until the Fall. While red-bellied woodpeckers aggressively defend their nest sites, the non-native European starling tends to take over nest sites.

Red-bellied woodpeckers like other species of woodpeckers, dine mostly on insects and spiders. These woodpeckers have tongues that can extend up to two inches past its beak. Their tongues have a barbed tip armed with sticky saliva to assist them with feeding on invertebrates. Occasionally, red-bellied woodpeckers will stuff an acorn or other large nut in a tree crevice in order to break it apart for its meaty contents.

Red-bellied woodpeckers can often be persuaded to visit feeders, especially if filled with peanuts or black oil sunflower seeds. Red-bellied woodpeckers will also feast on suet in the winter.

If you have any dead or dying trees on your property that are not hazardous to you or your neighbors, then consider leaving them up for nesting woodpeckers. Red-bellied woodpeckers can easily drill a nesting cavity in a dead tree.



Photo of Female Red-bellied Woodpecker by: Ken Thomas

Dead Trees are the Bee's Knees

A dead or dying tree might seem like its days of being useful are over. However, one dead tree can provide food and cover for a plethora of wildlife. Over five hundred species of birds, three hundred species of mammals, four hundred species of amphibians and reptiles and nearly all fish benefit from snags for food, nesting or shelter. So, if your dead or dying tree is not in a hazardous location (to you or your neighbors) and complies with local ordinances, then leave it up for wildlife!

Standing dead trees are known as 'snags', and when they fall, they are known as 'logs'. Snags are ideal habitat for cavity nesting species like [bats](#), [owls](#), woodpeckers, [flying squirrels](#) and other wildlife species. The layers of the tree provide an insulating effect that helps take the edge off of really hot days and helps retain heat in the dead of winter. The decaying wood also provides a food resource for all sorts of insects which, in turn, feed all sorts of small mammals and birds. Bare branches at the top of snags also serve as lookout locations for birds of prey like red-tailed hawks. Loose bark on dead trees can also provide temporary roosting habitat for bats. Softwood tree species tend to make the best food and foraging sites for wildlife while hardwood species, like oaks, tend to provide better cavities for nesting.

When snags fall and become logs, the gifts keep on coming. Logs provide excellent cover for multiple species of salamanders as well as small mammals. If the log is in the right location, a male ruffed grouse may utilize it for courting the ladies. If the log is large enough and has holes in it, species like foxes, raccoons and opossums may use it for shelter. Insects also continue to feast upon the decaying wood, providing a buffet for insect predators. Sometimes logs in advanced stages of decay will serve as "nurse" logs, by providing nutrients and moisture for other plants to grow. As the wood continues to decay, mushrooms and lichens will cover its surfaces and eventually, some of the tree's excess nutrients will return to the soil, fertilizing the area and paving the way for the next generation of plants.



Eastern redback salamanders are commonly found hiding under logs.
Photo by Kerry Wixted

Backyard Wildlife Fun for Kids - Make a Berry-delicious Tree



With the holidays fast around the corner, everyone is busy decorating for the winter months. One way to decorate while also enhancing your backyard wildlife habitat is to make an edible tree for wildlife by creating yummy garlands and ornaments.

To make edible garland, grab a large piece of string and a sewing needle. Tie a knot on one end of the string and then add cranberries, blueberries and/or whole peanuts to your garland. Be careful not to wear good clothes when constructing your garland as many berries (especially cranberries!) can stain your clothes. If you decide to use peanuts, then try to push the needle directly through the center of the nut.

Edible ornaments can come in all shapes and sizes. One easy edible ornament can be made from orange or apple slices tied to a string. You can also cut out cardboard shapes, attach a string, smear them with peanut butter and then roll them in bird seeds. This is similar to the [pine cone bird feeders](#) discussed in the Fall Habi-Chat. "Carrot-sicles" are another option for decorating your tree or shrub while also feeding wildlife. If you have left over Indian corn from fall decorations, then hang it from a tree. Squirrels are likely to enjoy Indian corn the most. You can also purchase millet sprays from local pet stores and tie them into edible ornaments for seed eating birds.

When putting together your edible ornaments, you should use biodegradable string and only provide food suitable for wildlife. Cookies, bread and crackers are seemingly enjoyed by wild birds; however these items carry little to no nutritional value for wildlife. Dried fruit with added sugar can also cause issues for wildlife. Many times, feeding birds these items can cause more harm than good as bread and sugary foods are similar to junk food for wildlife. One definite no-no is feeding moldy bread to birds, as those mold spores may cause fatal respiratory infections like Aspergillosis.

Wild Acres in Action



Barred owl, photo by Susan Vogel

Habi-chat reader, Susan Vogel, and her family were treated to the sight of a barred owl in their backyard. Barred owls are large owls that are common throughout Maryland. Like many owls, barred owls tend to be heard more than they are seen. Barred owls produce a distinct call that sounds similar to someone shouting 'Who-cooked-for-you, who-cooked-for-you-all'. To learn a little more about Maryland's eight species of owls, then check out the [Owls of Maryland](#) page.

Thanks to Susan for sending in her neat find, and feel free to send me stories about your Wild Backyard!

Don't forget!

Winter is the best time to maintain your nest boxes!

To prepare for the spring, follow our helpful Habi-Chat tips to get ready!

If you enjoyed this issue of Habichat, you might want to check out our [Online Habichat Archive](#) and the [List of Habichat Articles](#) by Topic.

Acknowledgements:

- Photo of White oak leaves by: J.S. Peterson @ USDA-NRCS PLANTS Database
- Photo of White oak catkins by: R.A. Seelig, U.S. National Herbarium Plant Image Collection
- Photo of White oak acorns by: Steve J. Baskauf, University of Wisconsin- Stevens Point
- Photo of Male Red-bellied Woodpecker by: D. Brezinski, USFWS
- Photo of Female Red-bellied Woodpecker by: Ken Thomas
- Photo of Eastern redback salamanders are commonly found hiding under logs by: Kerry Wixted
- Photo of Barred owl by: Susan Vogel

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.

Write to Me!

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