



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

In This Issue:

- [Native Plant Profile: Possumhaw Viburnum](#)
- [Maryland Native Wildlife: Great Horned Owl](#)
- [Backyard Wildlife Fun for Kids: Let's Go Owling!](#)
- [Habitat Tips for Winter Wildlife Gardens](#)
- [Upcoming Events](#)

Forward

Welcome to the Winter issue of Habi-Chat! While winter may seem like a period of inactivity for many wildlife gardeners, there are lots of animals that are still out and about! In this issue of Habi-chat, you will learn about the benefits of Possumhaw Viburnum for wildlife, the natural history of Great Horned Owls, how to go on an owl prowl and some helpful tips for making your backyard wildlife friendly in the winter. As always, this is the perfect time of year to join [Cornell's Project Feederwatch](#) in which citizen scientists can submit their sightings of birds visiting their feeders.

If there is a particular topic that you would like to see on our site, then please don't hesitate to contact me to let me know! My information can be found at the bottom of this newsletter. Happy Habitats!



Project FeederWatch

Embrace the winter. Count feeder birds for science!



Maryland Native Plant Profile: Possumhaw Viburnum (*Viburnum nudum*)

Possumhaw is a deciduous shrub with an interesting name in the Moschatel family (Adoxaceae). The common name 'possumhaw' is likely derived from early colonist's observations of opossums enjoying the fruits from a shrub that resembled a European hawthorn. This name has been given to both the possumhaw viburnum as well as the possumhaw holly (aka *Ilex decidua*). The latter is relatively uncommon in Maryland.



Possumhaws are typically found in partially sunny to sunny areas that contain moist to wet soils. Occasionally, it can also be seen growing in dry soil. In Maryland, they can be found growing naturally throughout the state. Generally, possumhaws prefer acidic soils with a pH between 5 and 6.

Possumhaws can grow up to 20 feet in height and are often half wide as they are tall. These striking shrubs have glossy dark green leaves that are opposite of each other on the stem. The leaves have an elliptic shape and often turn a pretty purple or dark red in the fall. Some horticultural varieties are bred to produce more intense fall colors.



Perhaps one of the most endearing qualities about possumhaws is their clusters of fragrant, white flowers that bloom from May-June. The flowers are usually visited by numerous pollinators from bees to butterflies. In the fall, the flowers develop into clusters of reddish-pink fruits that turn hues of blue and black as they ripen. In many cases, once the fruits become blue, hungry birds like robins, cardinals and even woodpeckers will pick the shrub clean! Best of all- this shrub is relatively deer resistant!

Maryland Native Wildlife:

Great Horned Owl (*Bubo virginianus*)

As I walked briskly to my car the other night, I heard a distinct *whoo-whoo-whoooo* from the trees above. Despite the near freezing temperatures, I came to a complete stop to take in that wonderful noise. It was the call of a great horned owl, and during this time of year, the calls are designed to attract all the single ladies.

Great horned owls are the largest of our tufted owl species in Maryland. As their name states, these birds have two prominent ear tufts also known as ‘horns’ on the sides of their head. Great horned owls are relatively thick-bodied owls that have mottled gray-brown patterns on much of their body. These owls have reddish-brown faces, a white patch on the throat and striking yellow eyes. Great horned owls can get up to 25 inches in length and can have up to a 5 foot wingspan! Juveniles are covered mostly in grayish down. Males and females have the same color patterns.

Great horned owls can be found throughout Maryland in a variety of habitats ranging from wooded backyards to extensively forested areas. They are a highly adaptable, fierce predator that primarily feast on mammals and small birds. Skunks, groundhogs, moles, voles, mice, ducks, crows and even hawks and ospreys can all fall prey to the crushing talons of a great horned owl.

As I mentioned above, great horned owls often begin their courtship late in the Fall. Males will call to females, puff out the white feathers around their throat and bow. If a lady accepts his advances, then both will bow and hoot to each other. Usually, great horned owls pick their mates by December, but some will continue to croon in search of “the one”. ☺

Beginning in late January, great horned owls will breed and later will lay 1 to 4 dull white eggs that take a little over a month to hatch. During this time, the male will forage and will feed his mate. Once hatched, the nestlings will remain in the nest for 6-7 weeks and will fledge around 10-12 weeks.



Great horned owl by William Madoros, Wikimedia Commons

During the day, great horned owls are mostly sedentary. Occasionally, these owls will hunt during the daytime or will be flushed from their roost by a mob of crows. They are most active during the night, especially between dusk and dawn. Mated pairs are territorial and will threaten possible intruders.



Great horned owl chicks by USFWS

The great horned owl's signature call is a deep, soft pattern of "*hoo-hHoo-hoo-hoo*". During courtship, the male and female will often perform a duet of calls. Young owls will make piercing screams when begging for food while adults may scream when defending the nest. When stressed, great horned owls will often snap their bills. Many times, owls are heard more often than seen.

While there are no true ways to attract great horned owls to backyards, you can employ several tactics to help them out. First and foremost, if you have dead trees ([aka snags](#)) that are not a threat to you, your family and/or your neighbors, then leave them up! Great horned owls will nest in old tree cavities. In addition, try to avoid use of rodenticides containing brodifacoum and difethialone as these can cause secondary poisoning (and ultimately death) in a number of raptor species such as owls. You may also want to go on an owl hunt! (See article below). ☺

Backyard Wildlife Fun for Kids: Let's Go Owling!

Owling is a fun and enjoyable pastime that can involve the whole family. Owling is a unique method of birding that takes a fair amount of patience but can be extremely rewarding in the end. Understanding some owling basics can help enhance your success at finding these neat raptors!



Barred Owl by Dick Daniels

Generally, most Maryland owls sleep during the day and begin to become active near dusk. With a little daylight still glowing, owls can be easily seen during that time or at the first rays of light at dawn. However, owls also can be spotted later on in the evening, particularly on moonlit nights. Two of Maryland's owls, the short-eared owl and snowy owl, use open habitat types and are more easily seen during the day than other owls. Short-eared owls are primarily winter visitors that will frequently hunt in the very late afternoon in extensive meadows or tidal marshes. Usually, these birds can be seen on the lower Eastern Shore in areas such as [Blackwater National Wildlife Refuge](#) and [Fishing Bay Marshes Natural Area](#). During years when the lemming population is low in the northern reaches of the United States, snowy owls will sometimes make their way southward into Maryland. When this happens, snowy owls can be seen in our area in the daytime in pastures, on rooftops, and in beach and dune areas like [Assateague State Park](#). Currently, snowy owls have been seen throughout much of the east coast and parts of Maryland this year.



Owling Prep:

- 1. Learn about the owls found around your area.** In Maryland, eastern screech-owls, barred owls and great-horned owls are all very common species. From mid-October through the end of November, the tiny northern saw-whet owl may be seen migrating through conifer forests in Maryland. Some of these also remain throughout the winter. Try to familiarize yourself with the bird's preferred habitat, their field markings, size and other clues to help you locate and identify them. Check out the [Maryland Owls page](#) for more information.
- 2. Research owl calls.** Interestingly enough, owls are almost silent when they fly and are pretty good at camouflaging themselves! So, the best way to find owls is to listen for their distinctive calls. The [Cornell Lab of Ornithology webpage](#) has great information on owls and their calls.
- 3. Choose proper optics.** Binoculars with wider lenses help with viewing owls in low light settings. In addition, spotting scopes can also be helpful with viewing owls from safe distances.
- 4. Dress appropriately.** Owling in the winter time can be quite cold, so dress to stay warm. In addition, try to use outerwear that does not have a lot of reflective tape and/or noisy material.

Head Outside!

Once you have researched local owls and are all packed and prepared, then it is time to hit the trail! Many times, owls are loyal to their hunting grounds. So, consider checking out local birding listservs (like [MD Birding](#)), Facebook groups, or reporting sites (like [eBird](#)) to find locations where owls may have been recently seen. If there haven't been any recent sightings, then check out wooded habitats as well as those along stream corridors (aka riparian habitat). Always be sure to respect private property boundaries and closing times for parks and preserves.

While outside, try to keep as quiet as possible since owls have excellent hearing. The quieter you are, the greater chance you have of seeing an owl without disturbing it. Listen carefully and look closely to maximize your likelihood of seeing owls. If you do see an owl, then be sure to keep a respectable distance. Certain species can be stressed out easily if disturbed too much by people. For example, the long-eared owl is a rare winter visitor in Maryland, but it will quickly abandon its winter roost if just one person gets too close and disturbs it. Other species, like snowy owls, are often in Maryland because they are desperate for food. Also, please remember to minimize light used when searching for owls (i.e., don't shine a direct beam on the bird or wave your flashlight around) and to minimize the use of recordings of prey and/or owl calls. Overuse of calls can distract birds and ultimately can stress them out.

If you are interested in tagging along with a group to look for owls, then check out local nature centers and parks as they often offer owl prowl hikes around the state. Check out the [Maryland State Parks calendar](#) to find out if an owl prowl is scheduled at a State Park near you.

Habitat Tips for Winter Wildlife Gardens

With wintery weather right around the corner, here are a few helpful tips to get your Wild Acres ready!

1. **Provide water-** Water is important for wildlife at any time of the year. However, water can be very scarce when winter temps dip below freezing. There are a variety of heated bird baths available for purchase as well as heated dog bowls. If the bath or bowl you have is more than a few inches deep, then consider placing a brick or stones in it to provide a safe ledge for thirsty wildlife.



Mourning doves gather around a heated bird bath by Linda, ([Flickr User: akahodag](#))

2. **Offer fatty foods-** Birds need a lot of calories in the winter, so in addition high quality seeds like black oil sunflower, millet and nyjer seeds, also offer foods such as hulled peanuts, suet and peanut butter. Feel free to get creative and make [pinecone birdfeeders](#)!
3. **Skip the bread-** Bread does not provide the nutrition needed for winter wildlife. This also includes using bread products like bagels to create bird feeders. In addition, moldy bread can cause respiratory problems in birds such as aspergillosis.
4. **Don't forget berry-bearers!** Berry producing shrubs can be a wonderful food resource for many species of wildlife. Many times, it takes several freezes and thaws for berries to become palatable. So, in late winter, the berry buffet usually opens! Check out the [Winter Berries for Wildlife post](#) for more ideas.



5. **Leave the leaves-** If you still have some lingering leaves in your yard, then leave them! Leaves provide shelter for many amphibians, reptiles and invertebrates. Some species will collect leaves to line winter roosts or nests. In addition, the slow decomposition of leaves helps replenish nutrients in the soil.



6. **Recycle your Christmas tree-** Once the holidays are over, and you need to rehome your Christmas tree, consider recycling it for wildlife. Old trees can instantly become brush piles which provide shelter for a variety of species such as sparrows and juncos. If you don't want to create a brush pile, then consider chopping up the trunk to create DIY feeders or use a wood chipper to create fresh mulch.



Recycle your trees for wildlife by [Simon Li](#)

7. **Provide roost boxes-** Roost boxes are similar to nest boxes, but they are designed to provide secure shelter from predators. Birds such as downy woodpeckers, nuthatches, titmice, chickadees and wrens will often use roost boxes. Roost boxes typically have less ventilation holes, interior perches, larger dimensions and thicker walls than nest boxes. However, if roost boxes are not available, then you can usually just leave some clean nest boxes up.

Wild Acres In Action



Just as I was putting the finishing touches on this edition of Habi-Chat, John W. Mause sent me the three lovely photos above! These pictures are of a barred owl seen hanging around the NASA Goddard Space Flight Center. Barred owls are one of our larger owl species found in Maryland. They are grayish in color and have brown streaking on their chest and barring on their body. Thanks to John for sharing! ☺

Feel free to send me stories about your Wild Backyard!

2013-2014 Dates to Remember

- **12/7- 8-10:00pm** Owl Prowl Hike. \$5 pp. Soldiers Delight NEA, Owings Mills. Please call 410-461-5006 to register.
(<http://www.dnr.state.md.us/publiclands/central/soldiersdelight.asp>)
- **12/15- 2:00pm** Snakes Uncoiled. Free! Merkle Wildlife Sanctuary, Upper Marlboro. Please call 301-888-1377 to register.
(<http://www.dnr.state.md.us/publiclands/southern/merkle.asp>)
- **12/22- 1-3:00pm** The Plight of Maryland's Bats. Learn about MD's bats and build a bat house. \$8 pp. Please call 301-888-1377 to register.
(<http://www.dnr.state.md.us/publiclands/southern/merkle.asp>)
- **12/28- 5-8:00pm** Owl Prowl Hike. Free. Please call 301-888-1377 to register.
(<http://www.dnr.state.md.us/publiclands/southern/merkle.asp>)
- **1/1-** First Day Hikes! Check out Maryland State Parks for one near you.
(<http://www.dnr.state.md.us/publiclands/>)
- **1/11- 11-10:00am** Fascination with Snakes with Ray Bosmans, Free! Howard County Conservancy (<http://www.hcconservancy.org/upcoming-events.html>)

- **1/5- 1-2:00pm** National Bird Day celebrating with local raptors! \$2 pp. North Point State Park, Edgemere. (<http://www.dnr.state.md.us/publiclands/central/northpoint.asp>)
- **1/16 7:00pm** Still Life in Hibernation- sketching natural objects session. \$5 for non-members, free for members. The Natural History Society of MD, Baltimore. Please register on Meetup: <http://www.meetup.com/marylandnature/events/152559082/>
- **1/28- 7:30pm** Introduction to the Rose Family in Maryland by Christopher Puttock. Free. Maryland Native Plant Society, Kensington. (<http://www.mdflora.org/meetings.html>)
- **2/8- 7:00pm** Seeing Trees: Extraordinary Secrets of Everyday Trees with author Nancy Ross Hugo. \$. Howard County Conservancy (<http://www.hcconservancy.org/upcoming-events.html>)
- **2/15- 5:00pm** Owl Prowl. \$3 pp or \$10 for a family of 4. Elk Neck State Park, North East. Please call 410-287-5333 to make a reservation. (<http://www.dnr.state.md.us/publiclands/central/elkneck.asp>)
- **2/16- 3:00pm** Marvelous Mammals of Anne Arundel County by Kerry Wixted. Free. Carrie Weedon Science Center, Galesville. (<http://www.carrieweedon.org/>)
- **2/25- 7:30pm** Maryland Biodiversity Project by Bill Hubick and Jim Brighton. Free. Maryland Native Plant Society, Kensington. (<http://www.mdflora.org/meetings.html>)
- **2/28- 7:00pm** Maryland Amphibian and Reptile Atlas (MARA) Project Update. free for members. The Natural History Society of MD, Baltimore. Please register on Meetup: <http://www.meetup.com/marylandnature/events/152650542/>

Acknowledgements

- Great horned owl cover photo by Andrea Westmoreland
- Fall possumhaw by Josiah Lau Photography
- Great horned owl by William Madoros, Wikimedia Commons
- Great horned owl chicks by USFWS
- Barred Owl by Dick Daniels
- Mourning doves by Linda, (Flickr User: akahodag)
- Recycled trees by Simon Li
- Barred owl photos by John W. Mause
- All other photos by Kerry Wixted

We want to hear from you!

Letters, e-mail, photos, drawings, etc!

Kerry Wixted
 Maryland Wildlife and Heritage Service
 580 Taylor Ave., E-1
 Annapolis MD 21401
 phone: 410-260-8566
 fax: 410-260-8596
 e-mail: kwixted@dnr.state.md.us

Habichat, the newsletter for Maryland's Stewards of Backyard Wildlife, is published by the Wildlife and Heritage Service, Maryland Department of Natural Resources. The facilities and services of the Maryland Department of Natural Resources are available to all without regard to race, color, religion, sex, sexual orientation, age, national origin, physical or mental disability. This document is available in alternative format upon request from a qualified individual with a disability.

