



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

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Welcome to the Fall Issue of Habi-Chat! Personally, Fall is my favorite time of year! I love the autumnal hues of yellows, oranges, and reds as deciduous trees prepare for the winter as well as the flashes of fall migrants that pass through the area. This year seems like a good year for our fall wildlife feature: rose-breasted grosbeaks! In addition, native asters like the white wood aster are out in bloom to feed late season pollinators. I hope you enjoy this Fall issue!

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!



Maryland Native Plant Profile:

White Wood Aster (*Eurybia divaricata*)

As Fall creeps in, many wild asters begin to bloom along roads, trails, and in forests. One pretty perennial aster is white wood aster (*Eurybia divaricata*). This seemingly diminutive plant can be found in bloom in late summer through early Fall in part-sun to shaded conditions. While the plant only reaches 24 inches in height, it is known to self seed and spread rapidly throughout understory environments.

Like many asters, white wood aster has two types of flowers: disc and ray. Each flower head has a cluster of yellow or rose colored disc flowers surrounded by white, starry ray flowers. The leaves alternate up the stem and have 3 distinct leaf shapes. The basal leaves (at the bottom of the plant) are egg-shaped with heart-like bases. From the middle of the plant to the top, the cauline leaves are also egg-shaped but often have winged stems (aka petioles). The leaves along the extremities of the plant (aka distal leaves) almost lack petioles completely. This plant can be found in dry to moist woodlands, along roadsides, and in clearings. It naturally grows from New Hampshire south along the Appalachians, west to Ohio.

White wood aster provides a great nectar source for late season butterflies, and the seeds are consumed by juncos, sparrows, goldfinches and other birds. In many cases, deer will leave this plant alone.



White wood aster by Wikimedia Commons (left) and (right)
Fritz Flohr Reynolds

Don' t forget about fall plant sales!
Check out the Maryland Native Plant Society website for Native Plant Sales near you!
(<http://www.mdflora.org/plantsales.html>)

Maryland Native Wildlife

Rose-breasted grosbeak (*Pheucticus ludovicianus*)

Rose-breasted grosbeaks are striking members of the cardinal family (Cardinalidae). These stocky, starling-sized birds sport large bills designed for crushing seeds, fruits, and insects. Males are black and white with a distinctive red chevron extending from their throat down to their breast. In contrast, females and juveniles are streaked brown with a distinct white eye stripe. Both males and females sport white patches on their wings and tail which can be useful for identification.



Red-breasted grosbeaks commonly visit feeders in the spring and fall by Waldo Jaquith, Wikimedia Commons

Typically, rose-breasted grosbeaks breed in deciduous and conifer forests in the eastern United States, including Maryland. Often, they are highly visible during migration when hungry birds visit backyards to fuel their flights with seeds and fruits. Their migration journey spans from their breeding grounds in the Northeast and Canada down to central and South America. In winter, their preferred habitat is often open woodlands.

To attract rose-breasted grosbeaks to your backyard, be sure to keep feeders stocked with sunflower seed, safflower seed, and/or raw peanuts in spring and fall. In addition, native berry-producing shrubs also can bring these birds to the yard. In the summer, rose-breasted grosbeaks switch to a diet heavily comprised of insects. Both males and females sing a song reminiscent of an American robin's song, but the grosbeak's song is described as more melodious. Interestingly enough, grosbeaks are some of the few bird species that will sing on the nest, and males often serenade females before switching incubation duties.

For more information on rose-breasted grosbeaks, check out our [fact sheet](#) on the Maryland Birds page.

Watching Wildlife: Fall Hawk Watching

During this time of year, hundreds of thousands of birds ready themselves for long distance travels to their winter habitat. Some birds travel from as far as northern Canada down to South America! Regionally, the mid-Atlantic raptor migrations are reliably one of the most thrilling wildlife watching spectacles to experience in the fall. It's not surprising that the science of hawk watching originated in the Eastern U.S.



Birdwatchers at Jug Bay Wetlands Sanctuary by Stephen Badger, MD DNR

Get Ready!

The best time to view migrating hawks is from September to November. Early fall skies are often dotted with Broad-winged Hawks, [Bald Eagles](#), and Ospreys. By October, Sharp-shinned Hawks, Cooper's Hawks, and Northern Harriers are on the move. If you head to the coast, you are more likely to spot [American Kestrels](#), Merlins, and [Peregrine Falcons](#)! In November, Red-shouldered Hawks, [Red-tailed Hawks](#), and Golden Eagles claim the skies as their highways.

To gear up for fall hawk watching, you will need a few supplies. Binoculars and/or a spotting scope are excellent tools of the trade to view hawks as they fly by. In addition, field guides are helpful for identification. The Hawk Migration Association has a [2 page key to common eastern migrant raptors](#). Good hawk-watching guides include "The Crossley ID Guide: Raptors" by Richard Crossley, "Hawks from Every Angle: How to Identify Raptors In Flight" by Jerry Liguori and David Sibley and "Hawks in Flight" by Pete Dunne, David Sibley, and Clay Sutton. You may also want to consider joining a local chapter of the [Maryland Ornithological Society](#) to meet local experts and to join hawk watching events.

Hawk Hotspots!

Most of the mid-Atlantic region's well-known hotspots are located either on the coast or along mountain ridges. Maryland is lucky to have both! The Maryland Ornithological Society website includes a list of several prime raptor watching sites: Town Hill (Allegany County), Turkey Point

(Cecil County), Washington Monument State Park (Washington County), and Table Rock (Garrett County). To check out more information on these sites, please [visit their page](#) . A relatively new site is the Cromwell Valley Park Hawkwatch on the northeast side of Baltimore. If you are willing to travel, then the [Hawk Mountain Sanctuary](#) in Pennsylvania and [Cape May](#) in New Jersey are other great hawk hotspots.



American Kestrel in flight by Vince Maidens, Wikimedia Commons

Join a Hawk Watch!

In addition to being a fun past time, fall hawk watching can also yield important data for scientists. Organizations such as the [Hawk Migration Association](#) works with local birding groups and naturalists to collect important population data around North America. Most of the hawk hotspots listed above are part of the hawk watch network. To learn more about these and many other regional hawk watches, as well as check out current flight counts, please visit the [HawkCount](#) website.



Fall Habitat Tip: Leave the leaves! Leaf litter provides habitat for all sorts of beneficial invertebrates as well as shelter for eggs, larvae, pupae and even adult butterflies. Leaf litter also helps replenish soil nutrients.

Habitat Tips: Fuel Fall Migrants

It's time to gear up for winter! Many critters are on the move gathering food for winter and/or flying to winter refuges. You can help wildlife by following these simple tips:

1. ***Provide late-season nectar sources.*** Monarchs are well known for their worldly travels, but other butterfly species such as the common buckeye are also in the midst of migration. Late-season wildflowers such as [goldenrods](#) provide an excellent nectar source for these species as well as for bees and other pollinators.
2. ***Bring out the seeds!*** This time of year is the best time to start putting your bird feeders back up for migrants. Mourning doves and many sparrow species also love to pick seeds off the ground. Don't forget to keep those feeders clean, though. Also, if you are in black bear territory, then you may want to consider waiting until mid-November to put feeders up to prevent conflicts with hungry bears.
3. ***Grow your own seed.*** Black-eyed susans, coneflowers, liatris, and more all are excellent fall seed sources for local and migrating wildlife. Even grasses such as eastern gammagrass, switchgrass, Virginia wild rye, and bluestem can provide valuable seeds and cover.
4. ***Provide berries.*** Berry-producing shrubs and trees are great sources of food for migrant species. Species like [possumhaw viburnum](#) and [spicebush](#) are good choices for fall fruit.
5. ***Provide nuts & acorns.*** Nuts and acorns (aka hard mast) are a very important food resource for a number of wildlife species. While most hard mast species take a long time to fruit, they are well worth the wait! Species of oaks, [hickories](#), walnuts, [American beech](#), and [hazelnut](#) can all be beneficial to wildlife.



Goldenrods are great for hungry pollinators by Kerry Wixted



Acorns are wonderful for wildlife by David Hill

6. ***Keep those nectar feeders up!*** A common myth is that if you keep hummingbird feeders up too long, then the hummingbirds will not migrate. However, hummingbirds will migrate on their own regardless of what you do with your feeder. In MD, late season migrating hummingbirds can continue through November, so keep your nectar feeders up as long as you are seeing visitors. Some lucky folks have even had hummingbirds overwinter at their houses!



Hummingbirds can stick around for a while, so leave those feeders up! Photo by Scott Kuhl

7. ***Plan for next year!*** Pat yourself on the back for a year well-done with wildlife gardening. As the temps begin to drop, pull out the garden guides and dream about next year's adventures! ☺

Want more Habi-chats?: Check out our archives here:

http://www.dnr.maryland.gov/wildlife/Habitat/WildAcres/habichat_topics.asp

Backyard Wildlife Fun for Kids: Leaf Critters

Fall is a great time of year to get outside and enjoy the cool, crisp air! As the trees begin to ready themselves for winter, leaves are turning brilliant shades of yellow, orange, and red. One great nature activity for kids this time of year is to create leaf critters!

Step 1: Go on a collection tour! Arm yourself with a paper lunch bag and collect leaves, seeds, twigs and other natural objects of interest.

Step 1.5 (optional): Dry your leaves. Place leaves in between several sheets of newspaper and place heavy books over them for 4-7 days until dry. Fresh leaves can be used to create critters, but the leaves can curl as they naturally dry. On the other hand, dried leaves are much more fragile than fresh leaves.



Step 2: Design! Use various craft supplies such as googly eyes, pom-poms, chenille stems, construction paper, glue and more to create leaf critters. Critters can model real life creatures or can be designed from the imagination.

Step 3: Proudly display!



Acknowledgements

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- American Kestrel by Vince Maidens, Wikimedia Commons
- Acorns by David Hill, Wikimedia Commons
- Hummingbird by Scott Kuhl, Wikimedia Commons
- All other photos by Kerry Wixted



We want to hear from you!

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

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