

OPEN SPACES

STAMFORD LAND CONSERVATION TRUST, INC.

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." — Margaret Mead

FALL 2014

CREATING URBAN OASES FOR MIGRATING SONGBIRDS

HABITAT LOSS MEANS BIRD SURVIVAL IS IN OUR HANDS

— Michelle Frankel —

IN AN OPEN SCRUB HABITAT IN CONNECTICUT—SUCH AS PARTS OF THE ALTSCHUL PRESERVE IN NORTHWESTERN STAMFORD—A BLUE-WINGED WARBLER IS BORN. Over the course of the summer, it gains enough fat to make its migratory journey to Central America. While only weighing around eight grams, it will take a 2,000 mile plus journey to an entirely new habitat to spend its winter. The following spring, it will fly back that same 2,000 miles, hoping to find suitable habitat to establish a territory, find a mate, and reproduce. All along this arduous journey, it must find quality habitat to rest and refuel.

Just as you or I would need gas stations and hotels when embarking on a long road trip, migrating birds



A backyard habitat that provides vital resources for migrating birds

Photo by Michelle Frankel

need stop-over habitats where they can find food, water and shelter. As development continues in our region at an alarming rate, birds are increasingly limited by the lack of

adequate places to rest and refuel. But there are simple actions we can take in our own communities and even backyards that can make a big difference for these long-distance travelers, and for other wildlife as well. At this year's Stamford Land Conservation Trust Annual Meeting,

(article continues on page 3)

2014 SLCT Conservation Award: Scalzi Riverwalk Nature Preserve Volunteer Team

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PRESIDENT'S LETTER

— Richard Chiaramonte —



THIS ISSUE'S THEME: OPEN SPACE AND BIRDS.

LOOK! Up in the sky. It's a bird, it's a plane—wait; right the first time. It's a bird. And it's looking for a place to build a nest, or enjoy a drink of water, or find a good source of edible insects, or a spot to rest on the long journey of migration, or a delicious small rodent or two

to take back to the kiddies. In other words, that bird is looking for things abundant in the forests and meadows and lakes and marshes of open space.

Along with protecting our watershed, sequestering carbon and providing residential opportunities for many of our larger, four-legged friends, open space provides safe habitat for all kinds of birdlife. From hawks to sparrows to robins to ducks, there is nothing better for a bird than the protection of a forest or a pond surrounded by that forest.

Birds are our connection to natural history, going all the way back to the dinosaurs. In fact, many bird species survived the extinction at the end of the Cretaceous period (65 million years ago) when the great dinosaurs did not. But now, with dangerously reduced habitat, they may not survive the current extinction many scientists believe is underway.

But protected open space doesn't have to be the last frontier for wildlife, especially birds. Each of us can make our own contribution to avian support right in our own yards. We can do this with the plants we choose and how we choose to plant them. Turns out our friendly flyers could use a little help from us.

To learn more about avian habitat and how we can enhance it, take a look at the feature article by Greenwich Audubon Executive Director Michelle Frankel as well as the Q & A with upcoming SLCT Annual Meeting speaker Professor Douglas Tallamy. Professor Tallamy will discuss his book *Bringing Nature Home* on October 22 at 6:30 pm at the Stamford Museum and Nature Center. In the preface, he makes the point that "the wild creatures we enjoy and would like to have in our lives will not be here in the future if we take away their food and the places they live." It's up to us to make sure there is room and board for all species on the earth. We have created a big job, but it's still our job.

So come to the annual meeting to hear Professor Tallamy and talk with each other about what we can do to assure a balanced and sustaining world. It promises to be a soaring-ly good time.

Thanks and see you at the meeting.

Best,

CREATING URBAN OASES FOR MIGRATING SONGBIRDS (CONT. FROM PAGE 1)

we will learn from noted author and entomologist Doug Tallamy about the relationship between native plants and native insects, and how simple landscaping practices can significantly increase biodiversity in our neighborhoods. I will follow his talk with a brief presentation on programs and resources that Audubon Greenwich is providing in Stamford and other cities in Connecticut to enhance habitat for wildlife in municipal parks, land trust land, schoolyards and backyards.

MIGRATORY SONGBIRDS AT RISK

Neotropical migratory songbirds—birds that spend the winter in the Caribbean or central or South America and breed in North America—have been declining at an average rate of 1% every year since 1966. That's a 50% reduction in population size over the past 50 years. Some are declining at even more alarming rates—Prairie Warbler populations in Connecticut are declining at a rate of 7% per year! These declines are due to a host of factors occurring on their breeding grounds, wintering grounds, and during migration, including collisions with buildings, predation by hawks and cats, and pesticide use. But the number one culprit is habitat loss and fragmentation. Habitat loss on their breeding and



Blue Winged Warbler Shutterstock image

wintering grounds contribute significantly to these declines, but there is growing evidence that loss of stop-over habitat during migration is increasingly limiting their survival.

In the United States alone, we have developed 95-97% of all wild habitat, with 2.2 million acres lost each year.

In this rapidly changing landscape, our parks, conservation lands and even backyards may serve as valuable habitat oases for hungry migrants.

As Doug Tallamy points out in his highly influential book, *Bringing Nature Home*, this means we have shrunk the United States to 1/20 of

its original native habitat size. Here in Connecticut, although over 60% of the landscape is currently forested, at the current rate of development our region is expected to be over 60% urban/suburban by the year 2050, according to a 2010 U.S. Forest Service report.

A PATCHWORK OF DISCONNECTED AND DEGRADED FORESTS

To make matters worse, much of the forested habitat that remains is fragmented and degraded. This has devastating effects on forest breeding birds that require large swaths of forested habitat to reproduce successfully. During migration, these birds are not so picky, and will make use of any patch of available habitat to rest and refuel. But in our patchwork landscape, it is increasingly difficult for hungry migrants to find the relatively tiny patches of hospitable habitat interspersed between urban centers, pesticide-ridden golf courses, and residential areas dominated by turf and non-native ornamental plants.

The pervasiveness of invasive plants—alien species that compete vigorously with other species for space and resources—and the widespread use of ornamental alien species in landscaping residential yards are among the primary causes of habitat degradation and



Japanese Barberry

Shutterstock image

biodiversity loss in urban and suburban landscapes. An estimated 5,000 introduced plant species now exist in natural ecosystems in the United States, compared with a total of about 17,000 plant species. Examples of invasive species you are likely to find in your yard are Japanese Barberry, Tree of Heaven, Japanese Honeysuckle and Autumn Olive, just to name a few.

Alien plants have not coevolved with our native wildlife, so they cannot serve the same vital ecological functions as native species. Most native insects are not able to consume non-native plants, and in a comparison of caterpillar biomass—the primary food of insectivorous birds—found on native vs. alien plants, Doug Tallamy found that native plants supported 35 times more caterpillar biomass than alien plants. In another study, he compared both insect and bird abundance and diversity in conventional suburban backyards landscaped with alien ornamental plants vs. yards landscaped with native plants, and found that the native backyards supported significantly more insect and bird diversity and abundance than the conventional yards. Since 96% of North American birds rely on insects to feed their young, and



Japanese Honeysuckle

Shutterstock image

migratory songbirds depend on them to rapidly build up fat during spring migration, a landscape dominated by alien plants will effectively starve its birds!

There's also a difference in the nutritional value of fruit-bearing trees and shrubs among native vs. alien species. A recent study by Susan Smith and colleagues at the Rochester Institute of Technology in New York, compared the nutritional value of fruit, abundance of midges (commonly eaten by migrating birds) and fruit consumption rates by migrating birds of common alien and native fruit-bearing shrubs. Though there

100s of millions:
Number of birds killed by
domestic and feral cats
each year, according to
the U.S. government.



Keep your cats indoors!!!

Shutterstock image

CREATING URBAN OASES FOR MIGRATING SONGBIRDS

was no clear difference in midge abundance during spring migration on native compared to alien shrubs, the fruits produced by the native shrubs in the fall had significantly higher nutritional value and were consumed by migrants at a much higher rate than those produced by the alien shrubs. Though birds do consume the fruits of alien species like Multiflora Rose and Porcelainberry—which is part of the reason for the rapid dispersal of these plants—this and other studies show that it's somewhat akin to eating candy. Their nutritional needs are not met by a habitat dominated by alien plants.

When a bird stops to refuel, it will not continue along its journey until it has built up sufficient fat reserves. If a patch of habitat is so degraded that it cannot provide adequate resources, the bird is forced to search for the next nearest patch of habitat until it builds up sufficient resources to resume its migratory flight. The result is that birds end up taking detours on their migration routes and spending longer periods of time at stop-over sites. Arriving at their breeding and wintering grounds late and in poor condition, these migrants are forced to select poorer quality habitats, resulting in decreased nesting success and rates of survival.



Viburnum

Shutterstock image



Mourning Cloak

Shutterstock image

CREATING URBAN OASES FOR MIGRATING SONGBIRDS

While it's critical that we protect the last remaining tracts of large natural areas in Connecticut, we need to have a simultaneous strategy for these rapidly urbanizing areas where there are few large tracts of land left, and the habitats that remain are disconnected and degraded. In these areas, our town parks, conservation land and even backyards can serve as important habitat oases, or stepping stones, for migrating songbirds.

Noted ornithologist John Terborgh wrote, "Migration is a chain whose strength is that of its weakest link." We can strengthen that link in the migration chain that passes right through our local parks and backyards. As Ted Gilman, award-winning Senior Naturalist at Audubon Greenwich, likes to put it,

CREATING URBAN OASES FOR MIGRATING SONGBIRDS (CONT. FROM PAGE 5)

we need to think of our yards and other small patches of habitat as “international bird hotels,” providing vital resources at a critical juncture in the life cycle of these incredible birds. By implementing a few simple principles into our landscaping and habitat management practices, such as replacing alien plants with natives, providing a water source, and reducing or eliminating the use of harmful pesticides, we can provide these colorful overnight guests with the resources they need to continue on their incredible journeys. (See the sidebar at right for good choices to plant in your yard.)

Through Audubon’s Bird-Friendly Communities initiative, we are working with municipalities, land trusts, schools and private landowners to create networks of “bird-friendly” habitats across cities

throughout Connecticut, including Stamford. We worked with the City of Stamford and local citizens to restore habitat at the former brush dump at Cove Island Park and helped establish the Cove Island Wildlife Sanctuary, which is now a designated Important Bird Area. Just this past year, we worked with the Friends of Mianus River Park and the City of Stamford to establish an “Urban Oases” wildlife demonstration habitat along the Mianus River. We are now working with Mill



Juniper

Shutterstock image

Top Plants for Migratory Songbirds

Lindera benzoin (Spicebush)

Produces high quality fruits in fall

Phytolacca americana (Pokeweed)

Fruits in late summer and into fall

Prunus serotina (Black Cherry)

Fruits in late summer/early fall, supports 456 Lepidoptera larvae

Rosa spp. (Roses) Native species

include Virginia and Swamp rose. Produce rose hips in the fall

Cornus spp. (Dogwoods such as

Florida, Silky, Gray-stemmed, Red-osier, Alternate-leaf)

Produce high quality fruit in fall

Juniperus spp. (Eastern Red

Cedar, Junipers) Produce fruit in fall

Toxicodendron radicans (Poison Ivy) Produces fruit in fall

Viburnum spp. (Arrowwood,

Maple-leaf Viburnum, Nannyberry, Hobblebush, etc.) Produce fruit in fall/winter

Quercus alba (White Oak) Flowers

attract migrants in spring, hosts 534 species of Lepidoptera

20 billion: Number of birds in the U.S.
during the fall migration season



Shutterstock image

CREATING URBAN OASES FOR MIGRATING SONGBIRDS

River Park Collaborative to establish a similar demonstration habitat at Mill River Park.

We have also partnered with the Stamford School District and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to establish schoolyard habitats—enhanced habitats for birds and outdoor learning spaces for children on school grounds—at Stamford schools, including Stark, Springdale and Rogers elementary schools and Stamford High School. Hart Elementary will be establishing a new schoolyard habitat over the course of this school year. We also provide a Schoolyard Habitat Curriculum Guide and teacher training workshops to increase teachers' use of the outdoors as a living class-room. In addition to parks and schools, we have also provided personalized habitat assessments and recommendations to religious institutions, such as Temple Beth El in Stamford, as well as to private homeowners. We are excited to begin a partnership with



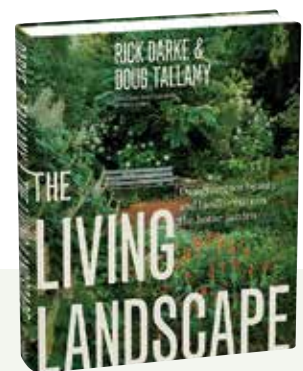
A schoolyard habitat

Photo by Michelle Frankel

the Stamford Land Conservation Trust to provide guidance on how to enhance the habitat value of land trust land for birds and other wildlife.

Michelle Frankel, Ph.D. is the Director of Audubon Greenwich and the Team Leader for Audubon Connecticut's Bird-

Friendly Communities initiative. She was a Stamford resident for four years until moving this past summer with her family to White Plains, NY.



Bird-Boosting Resources

To learn more about simple steps you can take to improve the value of your yard, religious institution, local park or other green space, contact Audubon Connecticut's Bird-Friendly Communities Coordinator, Katie Blake at kblake@audubon.org. You can also learn more by visiting <http://athome.audubon.org/yard> or ordering a copy of the wonderful book, *The Bird Garden*, by Dr. Stephen Kress from National Audubon Society. Be sure to get copies of Doug Tallamy's landmark books: *Bringing Nature Home: How You Can Sustain Wildlife and Native Plants* and *The Living Landscape: Designing for Beauty and Biodiversity in the Home Garden*. The birds will be glad you did!

THE INTERVIEW: ENTOMOLOGIST DOUGLAS TALLAMY

Q&A WITH OUR ANNUAL MEETING SPEAKER

— Tara Gravel —

THE TELLTALE SIGN OF A BRILLIANT IDEA ISN'T ITS NOVELTY, but that in hindsight it seems so obvious—it's the, "Why didn't I think of that!" factor. With this in mind, the theories of University of Delaware professor and entomologist Douglas Tallamy qualify as brilliant.

In his book *Bringing Nature Home*, now in its seventh printing, Tallamy argues that it's our duty to try to restore the balance of nature. And where best to do that but in our own yards and gardens? And while he's not the first to notice the connection between native plant species, the bugs and critters that feed on them, and the survival of everything higher on the food chain, he may be the first to put it in plain language. He's also funny, which you'll experience first hand when you attend our annual meeting and hear him speak on October 22 at 6:30 pm at the Stamford Museum and Nature Center.

This summer, he spoke with us about the message behind *Bringing Nature Home*.

Stamford Land Conservation Trust: I just finished your book, and I love it, but now I'm completely scared.

Douglas Tallamy: Scared of what?

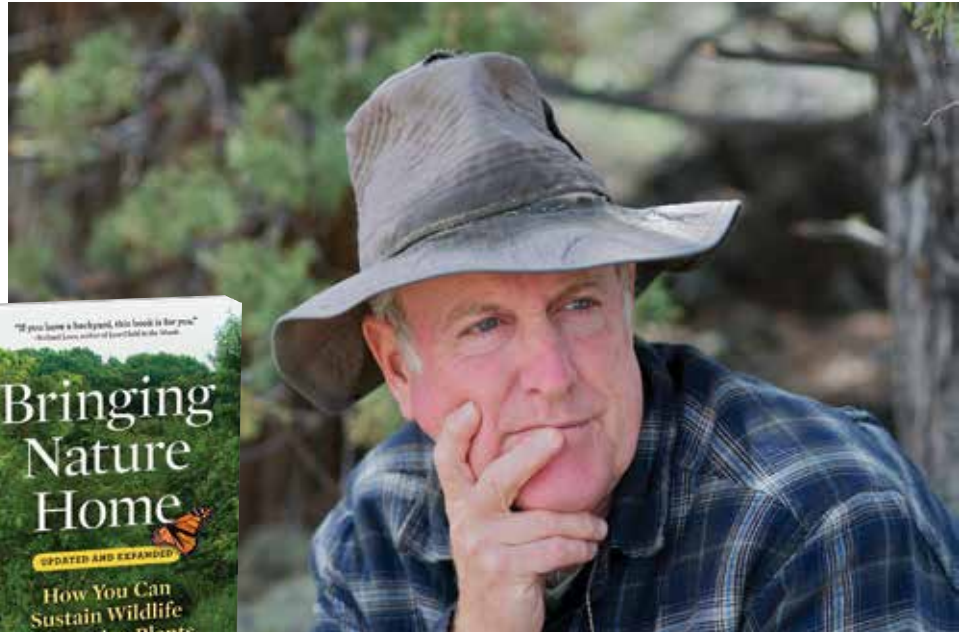


Photo by Jon Balddivieso

SLCT: Of losing so many wildlife species. You're arguing that a mass extinction is underway, that since we've taken up 95 percent of our land, 95 percent of our species will go extinct.

It's got to become part of our culture to recognize that we can't live without nature. And we have to put it where we are living because we're everywhere now.

DT: It is underway. It's been underway for at least 100 years. What's new is that we're finally recognizing our role in it. Step two is to start to address it.

Our challenge is that most people feel we are disconnected from nature. It's nice to have it around, but if we lose it, it doesn't matter. It's got to become part of our culture to recognize that we can't live without nature. And we have to put it where we are living because we're everywhere now. There's no reason we can't live with nature, we just haven't tried to in the past. The book is about how easy it is.

SLCT: You use your 10-acre property in Southeastern Pennsylvania as an example in your book. What are some of the big changes you've seen over your 14 years there?

THE INTERVIEW: ENTOMOLOGIST DOUGLAS TALLAMY

DT: The big changes are the number of species we're sharing the property with, in terms of plants and all the things that use those plants. Every year we record another species of bird that's breeding here for the first time. I think we're up to 54 species. I'm kicking myself for not counting the number that were here before we started, but it wasn't many. There certainly weren't any forest birds because we didn't have forest. Now we're at the stage where we need to edit. We've planted so many things and they've grown so much that in order to maintain the variety of habitats, we have to start removing some things. It's been an enormous success in my view.



Spicebush Swallow Tail Shutterstock image

SLCT: How has your experience rehabilitating your property changed you?

DT: What's changed me is the overall experience of realizing how well this works. It encourages me to try to convince other people to do the same thing. This is a positive message. There are so few positive messages out there with environmental issues, but this works really well. If we don't wait until everything is extinct we can do an awful lot to bring it back. When I grew up I used to think what everyone else thought, that we had to preserve portions of the natural world, and then we live someplace

This is a positive message. There are so few positive messages out there with environmental issues, but this works really well.

else and have these preserves. Anytime they chop something down, that was one less place we could preserve. I never thought about putting it in our own yard. But now that we have that possibility in our toolbox, it's really empowering, because we can literally do it anywhere.



Monarch Butterfly Shutterstock image

SLCT: This is a powerful message you're sending. What are some of the obstacles to awareness and acceptance?

DT: The media need to make everything a crisis, and one of the things they've sensationalized is interaction with the natural world. We've demonized it. Some people are afraid to go outside because they might get bitten by a tick or a mosquito or a cougar might eat them. A lot of people don't want any nature around—oh, it's too dangerous! They have no problem getting in their car, and we have 39,000 people killed every year [in traffic accidents]. They have no problem texting while driving. Or going to the pharmacy. You know the biggest killer, I think it's 32,000 people a year die from



Shutterstock image

misuse of pharmaceutical drugs. We're not talking drug addicts. We're talking about misusing common drugs. So the most dangerous thing we can do is drive to the drug store with our cell phone. But people don't care about that. We worry about the miniscule possibility of getting West Nile disease, which only kills you if you're 90. So that's an obstacle, getting people to realize that everything has risks, but nature's risks are quite manageable. It's not so dangerous to put it back.

SLCT: What do you think the role of an organization like a land trust is, aside from preserving open space?

DT: My next book is going to be about the national effort to build biological corridors, the need to connect the wild spaces that we do have left. Of course those connections have to go right through all those

places we live and work. That's where land trusts are enormously important. You can target those areas—get out your big map and try to establish biological corridors by strategically putting resources toward ones that fall in line. The biggest threat to biodiversity today is that everything is in isolated patches, which don't maintain biodiversity very long. So how do we get them to be un-isolated? That's the role of our yards; it is also the role of acquiring these pieces of property. The land trust can be enormously effective.

SLCT: What's changed in the last 7 years since you've published *Bringing Nature Home*?

DT: My entire life has changed! I didn't think anyone would read this book. I'm in academia. We write things all the time and nobody ever reads them, but this one I did target for the general public and I was surprised that people are reading it. I'm surprised that interest in it has grown instead of falling off. I'm on the speaking circuit and I do 100 talks a year. It's changed what I do day-to-day. But it's the first time I've really done something that matters in the long term.

SLCT: What are a couple of simple things the busy homeowner can do in their own yards?

DT: You have two kinds of busy homeowners. There are those who simply hire people. They can still do that. They can hire a growing segment of the business called ecological landscapers. It wouldn't cost them any more money. There are also busy homeowners who like to take a hand in it. I tell people to cut the area of lawn in half. Use grass as a means of moving through the landscape, but if we cut our lawns in half and plant them with productive plants, that would make an enormous difference. If we did that nationwide, that would be a 20 million acre new national park. Do you have to do that overnight? No. Just plant a tree. Plant an oak tree from an acorn. It's free. That's what we did at our house and they're 20-30 feet tall. Then you



Shutterstock image

THE INTERVIEW: ENTOMOLOGIST DOUGLAS TALLAMY

put the most productive plant that you can in your yard. Put in some viburnums underneath that tree and build a little habitat where birds can nest, so you're expanding your flower beds. You can hire a landscape designer and get as fancy as you want. You can make it a hobby that you pick at. Make little, achievable goals and you can see the results right away.

SLCT: What else will you talk about when you're here in Stamford?

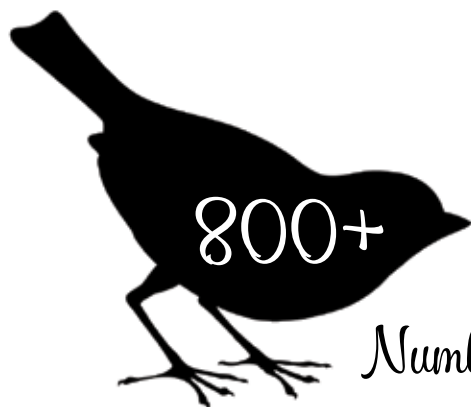
DT: The most important thing is that every individual homeowner can make a difference. Your property is never too small and the plants that you choose for your landscape all have roles that transcend your property. How you treat your property does affect everyone else. It affects your watershed; it affects your neighbors, the local biodiversity. These decisions are important. If I can get that message across I'll be happy.



The Living Landscape by Rick Darke and Doug Tallamy (Timber Press, 2014) Photo by Rick Darke



Tallamy's newly-released second book, *The Living Landscape*, expands on his ideas from *Bringing Nature Home*. But here Tallamy partners with horticulturalist Rick Darke to create a practical guide for gardeners looking to create a biodiverse landscape.



Number of bird species in the U.S.

BIRDWATCHING 101

GRAB YOUR BINOCULARS AND GO!

— Michael Moccio —

HEY! WHAT KIND OF BIRD WAS THAT? Did you ever wonder? It's not hard to become a birdwatcher. A bird identification book, a pair of binoculars and your yard are the first places to start. Just sit and observe.

Most birds look and sound unique. They can be identified by their size, color, the sounds they make and their location. Feather color is often all we need to identify a species. (Cardinals and crows are good examples.) Habitat is another identifying factor: Forests, meadows, shorelines, grasslands and other areas hold different species. Individualized songs identify various species as well as other sounds such as woodpeckers tapping on trees or the wing sounds of a Mourning Dove.



Shutterstock image



Shutterstock image

If your yard doesn't attract many birds, you can provide food and shelter. Bird feeders attract many species. Sunflower seeds are a popular source of energy for chickadees, nuthatches and many other species. Nyger (or thistle) feeders will attract finches, suet attracts woodpeckers, and in the summer a sugar water feeder will attract hummingbirds.

Trees and bushes, especially evergreens, can provide food and shelter year round. Try to find native and bird friendly flora that will provide berries and seeds and foster insects.

Adventuring out of the yard to spot more species can be a lifelong

experience. You can venture to a local park or wildlife area or, like many of us die-hard birders, travel around the world. Cove Island Park in Stamford is one of the best local spots for birders. There are multiple habitats ranging from woodland to rocky shoreline. These habitats are especially important to migrating birds in spring and autumn. Over 300 species of birds have been recorded there.

Joining other bird watchers is the best way to learn about identification, bird songs, habitats and where to find unusual or rare birds. Plus you will learn about other resources, local bird clubs and find friendly

BIRDWATCHING 101

people. The most important thing is to have fun!

You can join local birdwatchers on Saturdays this fall at 7:30 am at Cove Island Park. Meet at the entrance to the wildlife sanctuary just west of the boat launch.

Michael Moccio has been a bird-watcher for 25 years. He is Vice-President of Cove Island Wildlife Sanctuary and helped to preserve the present day sanctuary and its valuable habitat.



Snowy Egret

Shutterstock image



American Robin Shutterstock image

Helpful Hints for Beginning Birdwatchers

1. An American Robin is considered an average size bird and other birds are compared to it as smaller or larger than a robin.
2. There is no such bird as a seagull. They are called Gulls.
3. Some birds can't walk (Chimney Swifts) and some can't fly (Kiwi) but they all have one thing in common: feathers.

417: Bird species
recorded in Connecticut



Red Tailed Hawk

Helpful Resources

Best First Field Guide: *Peterson Field Guide to Birds of Eastern and Central North America* (by Roger Tory Peterson, Peterson Field Guides, 2010)

How to Learn Bird Songs: *Peterson Birding by Ear Eastern/Central* (by Richard K. Walton, Robert W. Lawson and Roger Tory Peterson, 2002)

First Binoculars: \$200-\$300 7.5 to 8.5 power

CT Birding Association: Connecticut Ornithological Association, ctbirding.org has links to bird alerts and numerous helpful links

Best Magazine: *Birdwatching* (www.birdwatchingdaily.com)

Stamford Wildlife: Check out Cove Island Wildlife Sanctuary (CIWS) on Facebook.

BIRD TALK

AVID BIRDERS SHARE THEIR OWN LANGUAGE

Here's a taste, adapted from birdforum.net and thedrinkingbird.com:

BOP—Bird of Prey

Chicamice—a flock of Chickadees and Titmice, which typically travel together.

Dip out on—fail to see a particular bird, usually one you've gone out to twitch. It was there, but you dipped out on it. The bird in question may then be referred to as a dip.

Grip someone off—if you dip out on a bird and someone else doesn't, then he or she has gripped you off.

Dude—a casual, fair-weather birder.

Local patch—A close-to-home location frequented by an avid birder.

Fallout—A rare situation where weather forces large numbers of migrating birds to congregate on the ground.

Life List—A list of every species a birder has seen or heard.

LBJ—a Little Brown Job. So many birds are small and brown and look alike, making identification tricky.

Tick—A new bird added to your list or the act of adding a bird to your list

Megatick—An extremely good tick, by virtue being rare and either very colorful or large. A good tick not just for you, but for any birder, even a jaded veteran.

Crippler—A megatick, which leaves you emotionally crippled by its beauty, size and extreme rarity.

Sum plum—Summer plumage

Twitch—Traveling a crazy distance to see a previously-reported rare bird.

Twitcher—An obsessive list-keeping birder who goes after rare birds found by other people.

Birder—anyone in between a twitcher and a dude. Keen, informed, and well acquainted with local hot birding sites.

SMALL HABITATS FOR BIRDS

A LITTLE LAND, AND A LITTLE CARE, CAN HELP ALL WILDLIFE THRIVE

— Sue Sweeney —

CONNECTICUT HAS BEAUTIFUL BIRDS, from yellow warblers, Baltimore orioles, and indigo buntings to scarlet tanagers and red-headed woodpeckers. Connecticut's birds are as beautiful as any seen in the tropics. Indeed, since many of these birds are migratory, sometimes they are the same birds. Most of these lovely birds have evolved as specialists who thrive only if their habitats are just so and who dine only on limited selections of co-evolved insects, seeds and fruits. Yes, we have our tough, generalist “park birds”—the robins, blue jays, and the like who can seemingly live anywhere on anything, along with their invasive European cousins such as the starling and the house sparrow. However, our heritage also includes an awesome array of the specialists which should be as much of a treasure for us as our world-renowned sugar maples.



Warbling Vireo

Photo by Steve Greenhouse



Scalzi Riverwalk Nature Preserve

Photo by Sue Sweeney

There is no question that large conservation areas with hundreds of pristine acres are best to foster the complete ecologies necessary for native wildlife to thrive. However, smaller conservations areas, including wildlife-friendly backyards, serve a purpose too, filling in the gaps between large conservation areas, and providing for the needs of at least some of the wildlife for part of the year. The return benefit to us of these smaller spaces is the unparalleled up-close access to intimately observe and enjoy wildlife.

Stamford's Scalzi Riverwalk Nature Preserve, at 6.5 acres, is one example

of a small conservation area; this one is in an urban setting abutting a major recreational park. SRNP is now five years into its 15-year restoration plan and results are showing. Just as in a backyard restoration, job one is to replace foreign plants with native ones. The birds also need a wide range of habitats from tall trees to open grass, set aside for them where they can go about their business without disruption. The greater the diversity, the more species served. Lastly, the water-dependent birds need a water body undisturbed by humans and dogs, where microorganisms can flourish and feed those farther up the food chain.

SMALL HABITATS FOR BIRDS (CONT. FROM PAGE 15)



SRNP volunteers

Photo by Sue Sweeney

At Scalzi, there are now nesting warbling vireo and kingbirds as well as species more often associated with urban riparian habitats such as Baltimore orioles, red-winged blackbirds, barn swallows, catbirds, downy woodpeckers, and mourning doves. SRNP wildlife spotters have documented 16 species of tree birds nesting in the preserve, and the list grows annually. In some cases, there are numerous families of a single species present—a far greater density than was previously possible when there were fewer native plants producing fewer native insects for the chicks to eat.

Some native birds can't nest at SRNP but often visit for substantial annual periods. For example, the wood ducks prefer large, quiet,

marshy expanses to raise their children. Once the kids are grown, though, a handful of adult wood duck children and mated pairs now while away autumn and early winter at SRNP. They are usually joined by black ducks and by hooded, red-breasted and common mergansers, all of whom also need larger, wilder places for nesting. These resting birds benefit from the easy access to a wide variety of naturally-occurring nutritious food from clams and smartweed to acorns in an environment relatively free of predators.

Likewise, the larger water birds—herons, egrets and cormorants—can't nest at SRNP. Depending on the species, they need large groves of tall trees on a large body of water

or a remote island. However, SRNP usually has a few of the big birds in residences, taking advantage of the local fishing and roosting habitat. It is not unusual for wildlife spotters to come across a black-crowned night heron taking an afternoon nap in a tree overhanging the water or a great blue heron fishing in the river, even when it is nearly frozen over. The great white egrets visit May through September and now the snowy egrets are stopping by for a few weeks in midsummer. While these birds would not thrive if confined to such a small habitat, it does work from them as part of a larger network of welcoming places.

While ospreys have their own nesting platform in Scalzi Park, the hawks don't seem to be nesting in



*Black-crowned
Night-heron*

Photo By Patty Morris

SMALL HABITATS FOR BIRDS

the Preserve (as yet anyway). Outside of nesting season, though, there are usually resident red-tails and Coopers, often with a young one newly out on his/her own learning to hunt with sometimes hilarious results. Red-shouldered and sharp-shinned hawks also visit.

SRNP also serves as a familiar migratory rest stop for many birds. For example, a sole male hooded merganser, a pair of wood ducks, and a small family of black ducks show up like clockwork every year a week or two before Election Day and then move on farther south about a week later. Likewise, SRNP's summer and winter mallard population ranges from one to two dozen adult birds,

most of which are park-tame and looking for handouts (no bread, please!). However, in the fall, there are as many as 200 mallards in residence at any given time. Most of these migratory mallards keep their distance from humans, suggesting that they spend most of their time in much wilder places.

Thus, this small preserve plays a role in the lives of numerous desirable species. Keep in mind that the undisturbed river, critical to water fowl, also supports dragonflies, fish, mollusks, salamanders, crayfish, frogs, and turtles. The riverbank, meadow and woods also host numerous butterflies and pollinators as well as a dozen mammal species.

Sue Sweeney, a life-long naturalist, gardener, and community organizer, specializes in non-chemical, minimally disturbing conservation area restoration. She is also a freelance nature photographer, and author of numerous articles on urban wildlife, chemical-free gardening, and similar subjects. Sue has a background in corporate management. Currently, she is Volunteer Head Steward of the Scalzi Riverwalk Nature Preserve. Her current blog, RestoringNativeCT.com, has been recognized for its outstanding list of CT native plants suitable for home gardening and CT native trees and shrubs.



FLORA FILES

POKEBERRY: A FRUITFUL NATIVE

— TARA GRAVEL —

POKEBERRY MIGHT RANK SECOND TO DANDELION in the category of “pesky to gardeners; highly valuable to our ancestors and wildlife.” If you have a yard or visit a park in Stamford, you’ve undoubtedly seen its bright green leaves and thick, pithy stems sprouting up in spring, and if you’ve ever let it go to fruit, you’ve hopefully been surprised and delighted, not just by the delicate beauty of the flowers and fruit, but by the plant’s usefulness to wildlife. Leave some in your yard, and its dark purple berries could serve as food to catbirds, cardinals, cedar waxwings, eastern kingbirds, northern mockingbirds and many other songbirds.

Native Americans used it as a purgative, expectorant and anti-inflammatory, and its medicinal properties are still being studied. All of the plant is poisonous to humans, though some parts, if prepared properly, can be used as food or medicine (don’t try it at home!).

POKEWEED FACTS:

Scientific name: *Phytolacca Americana*

Other names: American Pokeweed, Poke Salat, Polk Salad, Poke, Pigeon Berry, Inkberry, American Nightshade, Cancer Root

Range: Found in edge habitats and many types of soil in Eastern U.S., Gulf Coast, Midwest and parts of the far western U.S.

Poke salat: In this traditional southern dish, the spring shoots are boiled with a double change of water. It’s said to taste like asparagus.

Size: Older plants can reach more than 10 feet in height. They die back to the roots each winter.



Pokeberry

Shutterstock image

Food for thought: Along with songbirds, mammals such as fox, raccoons and opossums eat the berries. The plant can also host the eggs and caterpillars of the stunning Giant Leopard Moth.

Other uses: The purple berries have been used to make a red cloth dye and ink, and to color jarred fruits and vegetables. While gardeners and farmers in the U.S. consider the plant a pest, it is cultivated in gardens in Europe.

Fun facts: Poke compounds may have immune-boosting properties, and its toxins may one day help fight the battle against the invasive zebra mussel.

CRITTER FILES

THE FLYING RAINBOW: PAINTED BUNTING

— TARA GRAVEL —



Painted Bunting

Shutterstock image

NATIVE AMERICAN LEGEND SAYS that when the Great Spirit gave the birds their colors, he ran short of dye before he got to the last one. So he used a little of the leftovers to color the Painted Bunting. A flying rainbow is the result.

Rare in Stamford, Painted Buntings have been spotted over the past few years in the late fall in Cove Island Wildlife Sanctuary. (Google “Painted Bunting, Cove Island Park” for information and lots of pictures.) Like many of our native birds, their numbers have been dwindling because of loss of habitat.

PAINTED BUNTING FACTS*

Scientific name: *Passerina Ciris*

Range: Two U.S. breeding populations exist—one on the east coast and one in central North America from Northern Mexico through Louisiana, Arkansas, Oklahoma and Texas. The eastern birds winter in Florida and the Caribbean, and the central birds head to southern Mexico and Central America.

Habitat: Buntings can be found in scrub and shrubs near grasslands. They nest in dense foliage about 3-6 feet off the ground.

Size: 4.5-5 inches

Color: Blue, red, green and yellow for the males; yellowish-green for females.

Lifespan: A Texas bird-bander in 2011 caught and released a Painted Bunting that had been tagged 11 years and 10 months earlier!

Favorite food: Buntings forage on the ground for seeds most of the year, and eat insects during breeding season.

(Not-So) Fun fact: Male buntings have long been caught and sold as cage birds by poachers in warmer climates.

*Info from allaboutbirds.org and birds.audubon.org

1,500-3,000:
Number of feathers on a small songbird



Scarlet Tanager

BACKYARD SANCTUARY

HOW TO HELP WILDLIFE THRIVE

— Sue Sweeney —



Chickadee

Shutterstock image

THOSE OF US WHO OWN A PIECE OF LAND, large or small, have an awesome opportunity to help birds and other wildlife. Alternatively, we can also help kill off a good part of Connecticut's wildlife. The choice is ours.

The best thing we can do for wildlife on private land is encourage naturally-occurring local native plants. We can also plant diverse native species, preferably actual local genotypes such as those sold by Connecticut's Earth Tones Native Plants Nursery. The list of ways you can help is extensive:

- » Where nature hasn't provided, do plant natives that bloom early, late and mid-season.
- » Do plant natives with summer, fall and winter-persistent fruit.
- » Do plant native grasses and other native seed-bearing plants.

- » Do leave the fruit and seeds for bird feasting.
- » Do plant "edge" shrubbery and small trees.
- » Do provide a birdbath or fit in a water feature.

There are numerous organizations on line and in the community, which are ready to help us create welcoming wildlife habitat. However, there are also some don'ts. The first among them is don't tolerate invasive plants. For starters, every space taken up by a non-native plant could be filled by native that could feed the birds or the insects that feed the birds. But there's something much worse.

Every now and then I hear "but I leave the invasive [wineberry, porcelainberry, bittersweet, honey-suckle, privet, barberry, winged euonymus or what have you] for the birds because they like the berries." This is a BIG mistake. What the birds eat, they spread via their droppings. Feed them good native fruits like winterberry and arrowwood viburnum and they spread that; feed them invasives and they spread the invasives.



Viburnum

Shutterstock image

BACKYARD SANCTUARY

The problem is that many of the tree birds, for example, feed their children native insects that eat only native plants. So every time the birds eat and spread invasives, they are actually decreasing the amount of food available to feed young birds in future years. The birds can't know that spreading the seeds of invasives is negatively impacting their species. However, we can protect them by removing the invasives.

The other big don't, of course, is don't tolerate pesticides—this includes weed killers and commercially-raised plants that have been treated with residual pesticides that can harm bees and other pollinators.



Japanese Barberry

Shutterstock image

Extinction

- » **10,000** Estimated number of bird species alive today
- » **1,200** Number of bird species under threat of extinction
- » **190** Number of bird species that have become extinct since the year 1500
- » **500** Number of years since the Dodo went extinct



Passenger Pigeon

- » **100** Number of years since the Passenger Pigeon went extinct
- » **1-5 billion** Estimated Passenger Pigeons in North America prior to their extinction
- » **September 1, 1914**
Date of death of the last known Passenger Pigeon, Martha, at the Cincinnati Zoo

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WE'RE PLEASED TO ANNOUNCE THE FIRST ANNUAL SLCT CONSERVATION AWARD!

Conservation of our natural environment is a big idea and an even bigger job. A large part of our conservation responsibility is the restoration of segments of our environment invaded by, even overtaken by, invasive species and crowded by human development.

Fortunately, many individuals and groups across the state and the nation have given themselves to the task. Indeed, right here in Stamford, a unique and dedicated team of volunteers have taken 6 ½ acres along the Mill River, hard by Washington Boulevard and Scalzi Park, and turned it into the very definition of native habitat restoration.



SRNP volunteers

Photo by Sue Sweeney

The Stamford Land Conservation Trust is proud to announce its first ever Conservation Award to the Scalzi Riverwalk Nature Preserve Volunteers. Go for a walk along the river just south of the Bridge Street bridge to see what they have achieved. The volunteers have brought an area once overrun by invasive species and littered with trash back to a corridor of native beauty once thought impossible. It is an impressive accomplishment. And they are not done yet. We are very proud to acknowledge their work.

The Stamford Land Conservation Trust Conservation Award will be presented each year at our annual meeting to an individual or group who have made a significant contribution to the conservation of the environment here in Stamford.



DON'T MISS THE SLCT ANNUAL MEETING!

IT'S FOR THE BIRDS!

WHO: Open to all. Bring a friend and enjoy wine and light refreshments.

WHAT: Our guest speakers are Professor Douglas Tallamy, author of the landmark book, *Bringing Nature Home*, and Michelle Frankel, Director of Audubon Greenwich.

WHEN: Wednesday, October 22 at 6:30 p.m.

WHERE: Stamford Museum and Nature Center, 39 Scofieldtown Road, Stamford

Plenty of parking available. For more information, please see Stamfordland.org.

2-6 grams: Weight range of a
Ruby-Throated Hummingbird



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MISSION STATEMENT

The mission of the Stamford Land Conservation Trust is to seek and accept land through donations or by purchase to hold in perpetuity as open space. The SLCT acts as steward over such lands. It assists governmental and non-governmental organizations to protect and preserve open space.

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