

Crossing Paths



WITH WILDLIFE IN WASHINGTON TOWNS AND CITIES

Fall 2005

Sustainability starts here

By Jeff Koenings, WDFW Director

As someone who supports the environment through the Backyard Wildlife Sanctuary program, you probably have already heard of “sustainability.”

Sustainability—which refers to meeting present needs without diminishing resources for future generations—is a guiding principle for all of us concerned with natural resources.

Encompassing a broad range of human activities, some sustainability efforts are complex. Others can be very simple—such as this all-electronic edition of the “Crossing Paths” newsletter.

For the past seven years we have offered Backyard Wildlife Sanctuary participants the option of receiving the “Crossing Paths” newsletter electronically and, to date, about 15 percent of you have taken up that offer.

With stepped-up sustainability efforts under way across the state, this is an ideal time to complete the move to full electronic distribution of the newsletter.

This electronic newsletter provides you timely information without consuming paper and ink for printing or incurring costs for postage.

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Is Backyard Bird Feeding Helping or Hurting?

Every so often we’ve all heard the horror stories of diseases spread by and among birds at backyard feeders.

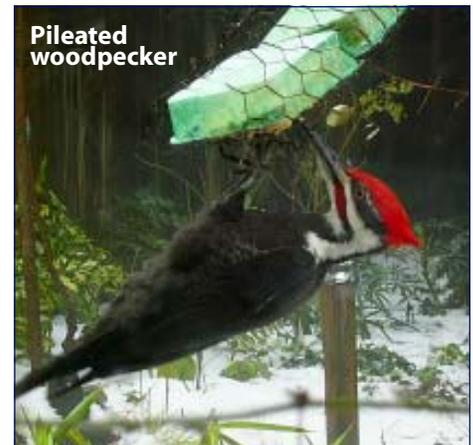
And once in a while those of us who stock feeders through the winter wonder if those fluffed-up balls of feathers braving the conditions outside our windows wouldn’t be better off flying south.

Is backyard bird feeding helping or hurting our feathered friends?

There’s no question that you can do more harm than good if dirty feeding stations end up spreading diseases through your local bird population. And it has been documented that feeding “shortstops” or causes some birds to discontinue their migration, perhaps to their detriment.

We don’t really know all the effects of backyard bird feeding. It might be part of the reduction in plant pollination, at least by hummingbirds coming to nectar feeders. It might be reducing native seed dispersal or consumption of insect pests. It might be creating an overpopulation of seed-eating birds, causing depletion of natural habitat.

It might be less nutritious for birds to eat more seeds and less insects and in turn they might be producing fewer viable young. Attracting birds to urban areas might expose them to more pesticides, more predation (especially by domestic cats), and more window collisions.



Pileated Woodpecker

There’s lots of disagreements and conflicting conclusions and opinions among researchers on any and all of these possibilities.

But there are some things we DO know, and we can do something about.

Spreading diseases

Bird diseases aren’t necessarily caused by humans feeding birds. Disease is part of a bird’s natural world. But when you invite birds to dinner at your home, you want to be sure to avoid or minimize the potential for spreading disease.

The four main diseases observed in Washington are salmonellosis, avian pox, trichomaniasis, and aspergillosis.

Salmonellosis is a form of avian disease from the bacteria *Salmonella*. This is probably the most common disease at bird feeders in Washington. It frequently afflicts the more colonial, flocking species like pine siskins, evening grosbeaks, house finches and

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Sustainability, cont.

This effort is just one small part of the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife's overall effort to minimize consumption of energy, water and other resources as we conduct business. Other aspects of this sustainability effort address agency motor-vehicle use, facility construction, maintenance and operation, purchasing of environmentally preferable goods and services and workplace practices such as recycling.

Department employees also are doing what they can to reduce paper use by practices such as double-sided printing. The Department is exploring the use of paper derived from straw,

rather than from trees. These steps, while seemingly too small to be significant, can add up to a substantial saving of resources when undertaken by a large number of people over time.

For those of you who have been long-term recipients of this newsletter since its inception in 1992, I know there's nothing like sitting down away from the computer screen to savor it—maybe in your favorite chair where you can also watch birds at your backyard feeder. So, if you like to do so, please feel free to make your own print-out, preferably on recycled paper with double-sided printing.

Meanwhile, by avoiding delays for printing and mailing, we expect to be able to provide you with more timely information. Now we can update "Crossing Paths" more frequently with seasonal information.

You can look for "Crossing Paths" updates on our website in October, January, April and July each year. If you would like to receive an e-mail notice of each new edition's availability, please register at <http://wdfw.wa.gov/lists/>.

Thank you for working with us in our on-going sustainability efforts. And thanks for all you do for fish and wildlife.

Backyard Bird Feeding, cont.

sometimes crossbills. The disease is spread by birds' fecal droppings and by bird-to-bird contact.

The first indication of salmonellosis is often a very "tame" bird on your feeder or around your house. The afflicted birds become very lethargic and are easy to approach and even pick up. There is very little you can do to treat the birds at this point.

Avian Pox is a viral disease that causes wartlike growths on birds' faces, legs, wings and feet. The virus is spread by direct contact with infected birds, ingestion of food and water contaminated by sick birds, or contact with contaminated surfaces such as at feeders, birdbaths, and perches. Insects, especially mosquitoes, also carry the disease from one bird to another.

Trichomoniasis is a disease caused by small parasites that can affect a wide variety of animals, including humans. The mourning dove and band-tailed pigeon seem to be particularly susceptible. The disease

causes sores in their mouths and throats, and results in death from starvation or dehydration.

Aspergillosis is a disease caused by a fungal mold that grows on damp feed or soil in or around the feeder. Birds inhale the fungal spores and the disease spreads throughout their lungs and air sacs, causing bronchitis and pneumonia.

If you see evidence of any of these diseases at your feeders, the most important thing you can and should do immediately is remove your feeders and/or clean them with a bactericide, like a ten percent chlorine or bleach solution. If you leave the feeders up, clean them weekly.

One of the better ways to address the potential disease problem during the wet months of the year is to switch to using only tube feeders rather than the house-like or



platform feeders. Feeders that have more flat surfaces collect more droppings, fungus, and other dirt that may spread disease.

There are other ways to minimize chances of a disease outbreak at your feeders.

Give birds space - Spread more feeders over a greater space. Crowding is a key factor in spreading disease because birds have more direct contact, jostle each other, and are stressed and thus more vulnerable. Use smaller feeders that allow only a couple of birds to feed at a time.

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Backyard Bird Feeding, cont.

Clean up wastes - Regularly rake the area underneath feeders to remove droppings and old, moldy seed. Mount feeders over a surface that can be swept easily. Move feeders around periodically to keep droppings from collecting.

Keep feeders clean and dry: Clean and disinfect feeders regularly, using one part chlorine or bleach to ten parts tepid water. Soak feeders and all parts for at least 10 minutes. Scrub, thoroughly rinse, and dry completely before re-using. Repeat every couple of weeks or more often if you notice sick birds. Avoid using wood feeders because they're difficult to keep clean. Make sure feeders allow rainwater to drain easily.

Use good feed - If any feed smells or looks musty or moldy, don't use it. Disinfect storage containers and scoops used with spoiled feed before replacing with fresh, clean, dry feed. Also, avoid seed mixes, especially those with mostly milo or millet; most birds will scatter mixes for more preferred seed and the waste on the ground can become wet and moldy.

Changing Migration Patterns

As for the idea that winter feeding lures migrants into sticking around this far north longer than they should, consider the species you're attracting.

Hummingbirds in particular may be at risk if nectar continues to be available in feeders. Like other birds, hummers are probably triggered to migrate by the changing "photo period" or hours of light in a day. Even if you continue to provide sugar-water, most of them just stop coming to your feeders because they're heading south.

But food availability can be another key migration trigger. In most parts of Washington, freezing

nights in autumn will force you to cut off the sugar-water supply. But in some of our milder areas, nectar can and is provided without freezing most of the year. In these situations there have been cases of hummingbirds staying around so long that when the inevitable cold snap comes, they freeze to death.

For our hummers, it's probably best to stop supplying sugar-water by early autumn, wish them well in their travels south, and welcome them back again in spring with another season of feeding.

Other species that are probably better off without our winter feeding help are waterfowl. It's not that ducks and geese might freeze to death if we entice them to stay around too long. It's more a matter of creating artificially high, and possibly unhealthy, populations of them.

An obvious example is the horde of urban geese and ducks fouling the sidewalks, lawns, parks, and lakes of many Washington cities and suburbs. Once-migrant Canada geese are becoming year-round residents, attracted to artificial concentrations of food like lawns, as well as direct human handouts.

These kinds of migratory changes in songbirds are harder to detect. Most of the species that you see at your feeder have always been year-round residents, like chickadees. But there may be some that once headed south every winter, and over many decades of backyard feeder help, have adapted to staying around longer or even year-round. Mourning doves may be an example in the west. In the east, cardinals and some woodpeckers appear to have expanded their ranges over time due to feeders.

Range Expansion

Inadvertent supplemental feeding

has increased some species populations. Red-winged blackbirds originally only inhabited wetlands, but now they feed on leftover corn, wheat, and other grains on today's large farms. There's speculation that supplemental feeding may explain the explosive range expansion of the house finch, a western North American species that was introduced in New York City in 1940 and now inhabits backyards all the way to the Mississippi.

Dependency

An important thing to remember about backyard bird feeding is that birds rarely if ever depend on you completely. Most spend only part of their time at feeders and continue to forage naturally throughout most of the season. Studies of black-capped chickadees, Australian magpie, for example, have found no evidence that feeding promotes dependency on one food source.

In nature, birds rarely "put all their eggs in one basket" when it comes to food sources because a snow storm or fire can wipe out any one source instantly. So you really don't have to worry if the feeders go empty while you're out of town over the holidays.

Increased Risk of Predation

There is much disagreement on this subject in both belief and research conclusions. Even Erica Dunn and Diane Tessaglia of Cornell University's Project FeederWatch, proponents of bird feeding, are unable to deduce conclusively that bird feeding is safe from increased predation. They stated that "Homes without any bird feeders at all will suffer a far lower rate of predation than reported in this study; nonetheless, we doubt that bird feeding causes higher predation mortality than

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Backyard Bird Feeding, cont.

would be found in more natural settings.” They were able to conclude that exposure of birds to predation by small hawks and domestic cats varied with habitat circumstances in the yard: it is better to have a specialized feeding system, such as niger tube feeders and separate suet feeders, with no ground feeding.

Whatever the possibilities, we have to think of bird feeding in collective terms. Hundreds of millions of people feed birds in this country, which means we have a much, much larger effect on bird populations than what is just occurring in our own backyard.

Backyard bird feeding IS enjoyable, educational, and possibly

even helpful to some birds. Resident Black-capped chickadees in Wisconsin, for one, were shown to survive winter in greater numbers and better condition when using feeders regularly.

One thing is for sure – Bird feeding is NOT a substitute for habitat protection and natural foraging habitat for birds. It is not a quick and dirty solution to habitat destruction and declining populations. It is a recreation more than anything. Declining insect foragers such as the thrushes cannot be replaced by increasing numbers of seed-eaters such as house finches and house sparrows.

So what’s the ultimate answer to the bird feeding question?



Right now, we leave that up to you to decide if you would like to have feeders or not. But, if you choose to feed birds, practice “safe bird feeding”: keep feeders to a minimum, keep them clean, learn proper placement and landscaping techniques for surrounding your feeders, and understand the value of natural food and native vegetation.

Attract Dragonflies to Your Yard

If your kids are off to college now and you’re already missing their cannonballing off the deck into the portable swimming pool, you can plan this winter to keep your yard buzzing with activity next summer.

Replace the pool with a dragonfly pond and watch Cardinal Meadowhawks diving after mates and our state insect, the Green Darner, basking in the sun.

Dragonflies, damselflies and most other members of the insect order *Odonata* rely on water throughout their life cycle. The juveniles, or nymphs, live underwater for months and sometimes years before emerging as adults. The adults tend to hunt for insects over water and lay their eggs in water or on adjacent vegetation.

Under the right conditions, even a small pond will attract some of these aerial acrobats to your backyard wildlife sanctuary.



If you enjoy bird watching or butterfly-watching, you’ll probably love watching dragonflies and their relatives, damselflies. (Dragonfly bodies tend to be larger, with broader wings, than those of damselflies, whose wings taper at the base.)

Among the largest of all insects, dragonflies are reasonably easy to identify by their field marks. Close-focus binoculars will help you get a better look. And like birds, male dragonflies are usually territorial

and defend their turf aggressively. (No wonder they were a favorite emblem among seventeenth-century Japanese warriors, who called them “invincible insects.”)

Dragonflies resemble red-winged blackbirds or flycatchers in the way they claim an elevated perch on a stem of wetland vegetation, then sally out to chase away other males or make a mid-air capture of a mosquito.

During certain times of year, you’ll also see the most striking and entertaining dragonfly behavior: mating in midair. Watch for two dragonflies in the “wheel” position, which means they’re in the process of mating, or for damselflies flying tandem, like a car pulling a trailer (the strategy enables males to guard their mates during egg-laying).

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Dragonflies, cont.

Before digging a pond to attract dragonflies, consider whether you live within a few miles to a stream, pond or wetland with a “source” population. You’ll get faster results if you do. Dragonflies are strong flyers, though most individuals stay around their natal pond or stream. But a certain number “float” through the landscape and that often means, if you build it, they will come.

The next consideration is size. Twenty feet in diameter is approximately the size recommended by the British Dragonfly Society. (The British have dragonfly clubs the way Americans have birding clubs.) However, you don’t necessarily need a large pond to attract dragonflies. Something as small as a wooden half barrel will attract breeding damselflies. Whatever the size, place your pond where it will be protected from wind and will get midday sun.

The ideal dragonfly pond should vary in depth, shallow at the edges and at least two feet deep in the center. Deep water offers nymphs a refuge from raccoons and other predators. Varied depths are also important to accommodate a variety of water plants. It’s not that the nymphs or adults eat the plants, (dragonflies are voracious

carnivores at all life stages), underwater plants provide important habitat for the nymphs, which need places to rest, hunt for food, and hide from predators. And emergent vegetation—sedges, rushes and other plants that stick up above the water’s surface—provides perching places for adults.

Such vegetation is also critical for dragonflies because the nymphs crawl up it when they emerge, making the transformation from water dweller to their free-flying adult form. And though dragonflies don’t rely on specific host plants to nourish their young the way butterflies do, some species do use water plants as nurseries. They insert their eggs into the soft stems.

What you plant around the pond is almost as important as what you plant in it. Don’t mow the border—let the sedges and rushes grow. Make sure you have some shrubs within a few feet of the water. That will provide more perching sites.

A couple more design details: Put a few flat rocks near the pond’s edge. Dragonflies like to warm up by basking in the sun. It can take a while for pond plants to get established. While you’re waiting for your emergent vegetation to grow above the surface of the water,



put a few perching sticks in the middle of your pond. Ordinary bamboo stakes—the kind you use to stake plants—will do the job. If you want breeding populations of dragonflies in your pond, it’s probably best not to introduce fish, because they will prey on the nymphs and eggs.

See <http://wdfw.wa.gov/wlm/backyard/ponds.htm> for more information about creating a backyard pond, including ways to ventilate it to minimize attracting mosquitos.

And with all that done, set out a bench, grab those binoculars or camera and telephoto lens, and enjoy the show.

Adapted from “Attracting Aerial Acrobats to Your Yard” by Cynthia Berger, *National Wildlife* Apr/May 2002, vol. 40 no. 3, with permission from the National Wildlife Federation.

Additional References

Paulson, Dennis, “Dragonflies of Washington”, Seattle Audubon Society, 1999.

Odonta Biodiversity Page

<http://www2.ups.edu/biology/museum/UPSdragonflies.html>



Wildfire protection can be compatible with wildlife provision

Wildfires spawned by our ongoing drought once again raise a good question:

Can you provide for wildlife, with lots of natural vegetation in your backyard, and protect your home at the same time?

The short answer is “yes.” But there are many conditions to consider and steps to take before you can maintain what fire fighters call a “defensible space” around your home.

First of all, keep in mind that Washington is part of a fire-based ecosystem. Wildfire always has been and always will be a natural part of our ecological history. The key to accepting that is to prepare accordingly.

Two types of wildfires are important to homeowners. Surface fires burn litter and plants, shrubs and small trees and happen naturally every 5-15 years. Crown fires are more destructive, moving through the canopy of a stand of trees, burning from tree crown to tree crown. Historically crown fires did not occur as frequently since surface fires prevented fuels from accumulating, making it harder for flames to reach the crown layer. But with years of fire suppression and debris accumulation, crown fires are more likely now.

To create that “defensible space” around your home, plant and maintain vegetation in several concentric zones within 100-150 feet around structures, with transition areas between zones to slow advancing flames.

The first zone, within at least 10 feet of your house, should be in moist, trim, low-growing plants like

mowed lawn, perennials, groundcovers and annuals. Keep this zone well-watered and free of dry litter.

The second zone should be low, sparse, drought-tolerant shrubs and groundcovers. Many native plant species work well here.

The third zone can include thinned trees or shrubs where ground debris is removed and overgrowth trimmed regularly.

The fourth zone, furthest out from your house, can be your “natural area” with selectively thinned trees and shrubs, preferably less fire-prone species.

Property with steep slopes or windswept exposures need greater defense distances. A house at the crest of a hill, with an overhanging wood deck and trees and shrubs close by or below, is at greater risk.

Although all plants will burn if conditions are right, some are more “fire-resistive” than others. These plants naturally have high moisture content, little or no seasonal accumulation of dead vegetation, low volume of total vegetation, non-resinous woody material, open, loose branching, and are drought-tolerant and slow-growing. (See the list of fire-resistive plants, most of which are also good wildlife plants.)

Pyrophytes or “fire-prone” plants that ignite easily or burn intensely should be avoided or minimized, especially close to structures. These plants usually accumulate fine, twiggy, dry material, have leaves or wood with volatile waxes or oils, gummy, resinous sap or leaves with strong odor, loose or papery bark, hair-covered leaves, are blade-leaf or needle-leaf evergreens, or flame (not smolder) when ignited.

Junipers and cheatgrass are examples of pyrophytes.

Landscape maintenance for wildfire prevention is different from that for wildlife habitat, but you can compromise by using your zones. To maintain your fire defensible space, you must regularly water, mow, rake, trim, prune, and remove accumulated plant debris – the very stuff that some wildlife species thrive on.

Emphasize this kind of maintenance just in the first few zones closest to your home. Leave your brush piles, understory duff, snags, and other “fuzzy” features of your wildlife sanctuary to the natural area furthest from your home.

Even in your natural area, however, you should reduce or eliminate “ladder fuel” configurations, or vegetation communities structured like the rungs of a ladder – leaves, grasses, small shrubs, brush piles, snags, and trees – to minimize the development of destructive crown fires. Reduce surface fires from climbing into tree crowns by pruning the base of the crown six to 15 feet from the ground. Reduce lateral movement of fire by trimming branches that span between crowns to ten feet or more apart.

Fire really is a natural part of our ecosystem because a vegetative community’s natural way of growing is very fire conducive!

One more thing you can do to prevent wildfire, (or deal with it more easily when it happens), is also something that benefits all wildlife: keep water on your property. A large pond can serve as a firebreak or may come in handy as a water source for fighting fire.

Fire-Resistant, Drought-Tolerant Wildlife Plants

There is no such thing as a truly fire-resistant plant, but some species are less fire prone than others. Many of these are fire-resistant in part because they need a fair amount of water. But some are also drought-tolerant — once they're established, they need very little supplemental watering. Some provide food or shelter for wildlife in some life cycle stage.

The following list is not exhaustive but includes plants that are fire-resistant, drought-tolerant and beneficial for wildlife. Not surprisingly for all those criteria, most are native (except as noted by *).



Photos by Jim Cummins



Trees

- Western red cedar (*Thuja plicata*)
- Douglas Maple (*Acer glabrum var. douglasii*)
- Oak (*Quercus spp.*)

Shrubs

- Serviceberry (*Amelanchier spp.*)
- Oregon-grapes (*Mahonia spp.*)
- Mock Orange (*Philadelphus spp.*)
- Golden Currant (*Ribes aureum*)
- Red-flowering currant (*Ribes sanguineum*)
- Buffaloberry (*Shepherdia canadensis*)
- Snowberry (*Symphoricarpos albus*)
- Cotoneaster (*Cotoneaster spp.*)*

Vines

- Grapes (*Vitis spp.*)
- Trumpet vine (*Campsis radicans*)*
- Virginia creeper (*Parthenocissus quinquefolia*)*

Perennials

- Yarrow (*Achillea spp.*)
- Lilies (*Lilium spp.*)
- California poppy (*Eschscholzia spp.*)
- Iris (*Iris spp.*)
- Lupine (*Lupinus spp.*)
- Penstemon (*Penstemon spp.*)
- Goldenrod (*Solidago spp.*)
- Fall sedum (*Sedum spectabile*)*
- Daylilies (*Hemerocallis hybrids*)*

Groundcovers

- Kinnikinnick (*Arctostaphylos uva-ursi*)
- Wild strawberries (*Fragaria spp.*)
- Stonecrops (*Sedum spp.*) *
- Dusty Miller (*Senecio cineraria*) *
- Verbena (*Verbena bipinnatifida*)*

Backyard Wildlife Photography Tips

Adapted from Philip Tulin's "Outdoor Eyes"

Be Patient

Nature is on its own timetable and you cannot speed it up or slow it down.

Be Ready

If you have a camera in hand, always be prepared and ready. Plenty of opportunities are missed because of not being prepared.

Nature Rules

Nature always wins. There will always be photo opportunities for you each day. You will never get them all because you weren't ready or you looked out at one of your feeders five seconds too late. In fact, you may still be talking about an

opportunity that you didn't capture that occurred five years ago. Look forward to the next opportunity.

Never Disturb A Singing Bird

A singing bird will sound an alarm when disturbed. When the bird alarm is sounded, all the other wildlife will pay attention. Depending on the distance of the alarm, the intensity of the alarm and the significance of the alarm, all the other wildlife will respond accordingly. If the bird alarm is due to your presence, your nature moment will be limited as most of the wildlife will move away from you.

Learn The Safety Distance From Small Wildlife

By learning the safety distance to a small animal, you will frighten less animals away.

Don't Be Perceived As A Threat

All wildlife that doesn't feel threatened will continue to go about their normal wildlife ways. Learn how to stop and remain still until the wildlife considers you safe.

Try To Photograph An Unobstructed Eye

When we view a photograph of wildlife, our eyes always look

Backyard Photography, cont.

straight to the eye of the animal similar to the same way we establish eye contact with another person.

Small Wildlife Appear Even Smaller

Try to photograph small animals from a low camera position to accentuate their size.

Learn To Photograph Wildlife On The Move

Practice photographing wildlife that is moving in your backyard or at the park.

During the next week, spend about 20 minutes in your own backyard and observe squirrels. You will

notice a very interesting pattern. The squirrels have a tree to tree, branch to branch, roof to roof highway that they always seem to go on. With thousands of combinations of branches and trees to jump and run on, they always seem to pick the same route. So, if you didn't recognize this pattern before, what else did you not recognize? Once you've identified the route, try to take an anticipated midair photograph of where you expect that squirrel to be. It will prepare you for "In-The-Moment Photography". Understanding that nature is not random will give you



Cabbage white butterfly

Photo by Kelly McAllister

more wildlife photography opportunities.

For more tips on how to improve your wildlife photography, including "Seeing With Outdoor Eyes and Understanding the Languages of Birds," see:

<http://www.outdooreyes.com/photo14.php3>

First "BioBlitz" counts species, helps landowners

Fifty scientists and local citizens conducted a 24-hour count of animal and plant species across 800 acres of Gig Harbor's Crescent Valley area this summer in Washington's first "BioBlitz."

"BioBlitzing is a citizen survey technique sweeping the country," explained Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) biologist Michelle Tirhi. "It's a concentrated effort to collect wildlife data within a biologically rich area to help landowners learn how to maintain that richness and save taxes at the same time."

Pierce County offers a tax break to those who dedicate portions of their property to wildlife habitat preservation. The property must qualify for the tax break with a wildlife assessment, like the BioBlitz.

Tirhi noted that Crescent Valley is one of 16 areas Pierce County recognizes as habitats for healthy populations of fish, mammals, birds, insects, reptiles and amphibians. From the outlet of Crescent Creek at the Gig Harbor estuary to its

headwaters at Crescent Lake, the area provides a variety of habitats that support a diversity of wildlife.

"We've known for sometime that everything from butterflies to salmon call this place home", said Tirhi. "But until the BioBlitz, there wasn't a clear picture of exactly what lives here. This snapshot inventory confirmed that wildlife we predicted to be living in this area actually does."

The BioBlitz turned up 66 birds, 15 mammals, six amphibians, three fish, two reptiles, 148 invertebrates (everything from insects to mollusks), and 123 plants. The information is being entered into the state Nature Mapping database coordinated by the University of Washington (UW) and WDFW.

At an open house following the BioBlitz, local landowners discussed what biodiversity means to them and how to use the tax reduction program.

The Pierce County Biodiversity Alliance (the Alliance) spearheaded the project, bringing scientists and

volunteers together from WDFW, UW, Audubon, Point Defiance Zoo and Aquarium, Northwest Trek Wildlife Park, Tacoma Nature Center, Friends of Pierce County, Pierce County and University of California-Berkeley. Tacoma's Zoo Society and Pierce Conservation District paid the \$8,200 price tag.

Scouring 800 acres in 24 hours was definitely intense, but Tirhi says everyone agreed it was also a lot of fun and most are willing to help with another BioBlitz.

The Alliance is currently planning nine community planning workshops in Crescent Creek focused on biodiversity and a second BioBlitz in the Puyallup River area for 2006.

Tirhi says other areas of the state could also be "bioblitzed" with local support.

WDFW's August 2005 "Wild About Washington" cable TV show featured the BioBlitz and can be viewed at <http://wdfw.wa.gov/pubaffrs/wildwash/archives.htm#2005>.

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White bird is special backyard visitor

Backyard Wildlife Sanctuary Manager Trudie McFall of Auburn e-mailed us pictures and questions about a white bird that visited her yard this summer.

“It seems to hang around with the finches, eats finch food, and chirps like a finch, yet it is mostly white with brown markings on the back and head,” she wrote. “(And) it has a band around its right leg. (Can) you guys figure out the story behind this interesting looking bird?”

Hmmmm. If it looks like a finch, sounds like a finch, eats like a finch, and hangs out like a finch, we tend to think it probably IS a finch – and not an albino because it does have some pigment, but perhaps just a fashion-setting one in its unique white plumage.

Actually, our conclusion is backed up by Cornell University’s Lab of Ornithology “Project Feeder Watch” which relays the following under “Other Strange Looking Birds”:

Most likely the birds are what they appear to be, only with some sort of color variation. Remember that size, shape, and behavior often will help to identify a bird even when its plumage looks odd. Comparing the strange bird with other birds nearby can be helpful. True albinism is much less common

than partial albinism, but easier to identify. Completely albino birds have absolutely no pigment in their feathers, bills, or legs, and their eyes appear red. There are several types of genetic color variants:

- *albinism*: all or partially white plumage
- *melanism*: extra-dark plumage
- *xanthochroism*: yellowish or orange plumage (usually instead of red)
- *erythrism*: reddish plumage

Other color variations, such as yellow or orange feathers, usually are related to diet. For example House Finches are typically yellow or orange in the west because of their diet. Learn more about color variation in House Finches.

Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife (WDFW) wildlife biologist Patricia Thompson reports that backyard surveys during the winter of 2002 included many comments about white plumage on birds. Several species were described, but the two mentioned most were crows and juncos. Crows usually had white wing feathers and juncos had white heads.

“We can’t know if there are in fact more individuals with white color variations,” Thompson said in her report that year, “or more people seeing and recording them. Still, it looks as if the genetic anomalies are surviving to breed and pass on the white color.”

Thompson also noted that the Sibley Field Guide to Birds even describes a white color



variant of the American Crow: “individuals with variable white wing-patches are rare but regular.”

The band on the white finch’s leg could be from any number of bird banding projects underway anywhere in the bird’s home range. House finches are considered residents, not long-distance or “true” migrants. But an individual seen in Auburn this summer could have been in Mount Vernon earlier this year and might be in Portland now.

We at the are not banding house finches per se, but we are involved in Mapping Avian Productivity and Survival (MAPS) surveys, along with other natural resource agencies, educational institutions, organizations, and individual volunteers. MAPS survey protocol includes placing numbered bands on birds captured in fine nets set up at designated locations year after year so that returning individuals can be recorded and habitat use patterns measured.

Trudie’s white finch would have to be captured to examine its band and determine its origin.

In the meantime, enjoy imagining the possibilities about this curious visitor.



I Love My Bat Houses

By Russell Link, WDFW Wildlife Biologist

I enjoy attracting bats to our property for a variety of reasons.

A nursing Little Brown Bat (*Myotis lucifugus*) can consume her body weight in flying insects on a summer night.

I take pride in the fact that my success rate of housing these flying mammals is excellent.

And my family enjoys bat watching during evening soaks in our hot tub.

Based on over 12 years of bat house research by Bat Conservation International (BCI), odds of attracting bats are good for well-designed, well-built bat houses mounted according to BCI's recommendations (<http://www.batcon.org/>).

I've installed four bat houses around our Whidbey Island home: two rocket style bat houses, one single-partitioned bat house, and one multi-partitioned bat house. All are occupied.

Contributing to this success is the diverse habitat on and around our property, including a mixture of agricultural use and native vegetation.

We also live a mile or so from a large lake. Most successful bat houses are within a mile of a stream, wetland, lake, or large pond. Bats scoop up mouthfuls of water with their lower jaws as they fly over water, and many insects that they eat need water in the development of their own life cycle.

To hasten the development of their pups, female bats choose bat houses located in optimal exposure: full sun in western Washington. All my bat houses also are painted with three coats of black, latex paint to insure an internal temperature that stays between 80° F and 100° F

through the day. (A female bat's body temperature in summer can routinely reach 104 degrees!)

In addition to helping absorb much needed heat, paint protects the bat houses against moisture, air leaks, and wood deterioration. Houses should be caulked during construction and preferably be screwed, not nailed together. The idea is to create a tight microclimate inside the house capable of trapping both the heat captured during the day and the warmth generated by the bats. If turned upside down and filled with water, a well-built, unventilated bat house should not leak a drop.

Bachelor bats and migrating bats are less picky, and will use bat houses with cooler temperatures. Periodic monitoring with a flashlight shortly before dark has revealed single bats in a rocket box and single-partitioned house.

In eastern Washington where average July high temperatures are 85° F or above, lighter colored paint and vents should be included to prevent bat houses from overheating. (See the BCI website for recommendations.)

Paper wasps quickly entered a vent in the first rocket box I installed. To solve the problem, I removed the wasp nest the following winter and covered the vent—which wasn't necessary anyway. Wasps still build nests in the single and multi-partitioned houses, and I remove these nests before bats return in spring. My bat houses appear to be large enough for wasps and bats to cohabitate for a season.

Twenty-four female Little Brown Bats occupied my multi-partitioned bat house until a house cat started "batting" the animals as they exited



to drink and feed. This group of female bats, called a maternity colony, moved into a nearby rocket box where they've lived part-time for the past four years.

All bat houses should have a rough-textured landing area extending at least six inches below the entrance. The entrance should also be at least ten feet above ground to ensure safety from climbing predators (raccoons, rats, house cats). A metal predator guard will help keep house cats and other predators from climbing wood poles or posts.

Bat houses should not be lit by bright lights.

Wherever bat houses are located, make sure there is a few feet of vertical clearance under the bat house. When exiting, bats tend to fly straight down and then move horizontally.

Bat houses are most successful where bats are already attempting to live in buildings. My single partitioned bat house was installed over a hole where a maternity colony entered between the

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Bathouses, cont.

chimney and siding. Although in shade until mid-afternoon, this bat house benefits from being located high and under an eave where heat is captured. The colony that was excluded now occupies a rocket box; bachelor bats call the new box home for the summer.

Data from BCI indicate that bat houses should be mounted on buildings, posts, or poles. Wooden or brick buildings with proper solar exposure are excellent choices for flat style bat houses because they absorb and hold heat. Houses mounted on trees are seldom used because they receive less sun, branches can make entry difficult for bats, and their aerial predators (hawks, owls) perch in trees.

Bat houses mounted on posts or poles are found more quickly if located along forest or water edges



where bats tend to fly. If a bat house isn't used in two full years, a new location should be considered.

As cute as they may appear, small houses are likely to not attract bats. I attribute the success of my bat houses to them surpassing BCI's minimal criteria of being at least

two feet tall and 14 inches wide. The number of roosting partitions is not critical, but they should be roughly textured and carefully spaced 3/4 to one inch apart.

The Mill Creek office of the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife sells several styles of bat houses. Contact me at Linkrel@dfw.wa.gov or 425-775-1311 ext. 110 for information.

There are few things as gratifying as sitting comfortably in a chair, listening to the squeaking sound that proceeds bats emerging from their daytime roost, and then watching them exit one at a time. Watching bats return before daybreak may be fun, but that definitely would have to be done from the hot tub.

For information on bat walks and other regional bat related activities, check out Bats Northwest at <http://www.batsnorthwest.org/>.

Living with Wildlife

The "Living With Wildlife" series that the Crossing Paths newsletter has long featured is now completely at your fingertips here on the WDFW website at <http://wdfw.wa.gov/wlm/living/index.htm>.

There are currently 37 species featured, based on those that people encounter the most or those that are potential problems. There is also useful information about handling young wildlife, driving in deer county, hiring nuisance wildlife control operators, finding wildlife rehabilitators, and other topics.



Photo by Ty Smedes

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