

## Create a Stress-Free Backyard Habitat

By Susan Camp

Jim and I always welcomed all animals to our property, even when some neighbors probably thought we were making a big mistake. Our plan was to offer food, water, cover, and space, the well-known requirements for a backyard wildlife habitat.

We felt that our four mostly-wooded acres bordering on Cedarbush Creek would provide sufficient room for a variety of native mammals, birds, amphibians, and reptiles. Included in this menagerie would be native and honey bees, butterflies, moths, and various other insects.

The plan worked for several years. Birdbaths and feeders were located on different parts of the property. The hummingbird feeder was cleaned and replenished on a regular basis.

Bluebird boxes were strategically placed away from overhanging limbs, although the first spring we lost a clutch of eggs to an Eastern ratsnake. We didn't realize how far a snake can stretch from a tree branch to reach a tasty treat of bluebird eggs.

Every day, Jim placed corn and peanuts on a feeder at the edge of the woods for the squirrels and crows, who mostly behaved themselves. The deer obeyed the rules for years and quietly munched grass up in the field, rarely venturing near the daylily garden or the house.

A new litter of bunnies was born in the front garden every spring, and we tiptoed around so we wouldn't disturb the babies or their mom until it was time for them to strike out on their own.

Raccoons came to see us every evening, and the opossums passed through, quietly and politely. We had a few wild turkey visitors every year, including one solitary hen we affectionately named "Agnes" after a character on the comics page.

In the spring of 2017, everything changed. We traveled to Europe for a month, and when we returned, we discovered that the deer had lost their wariness of humans and had neatly removed every daylily bud all the way to the house, snacking on tasty young azalea leaves along the way.

The new baby bunny in the front garden had helped himself to my oregano and chives. The squirrels, bored without their daily peanut handout to bury, had dug up daffodils and young plants.

Most of the wild birds had flown, looking for food at someone else's feeder, but turkeys had appeared to take their place. Jim started feeding the turkeys, and before summer's end, we had 27 hens, mature toms, and young males called jakes.

Today we no longer feed all of the animals on a regular basis. The raccoons, squirrels, and crows are still here. A few turkeys wander through from time to time, and there is a bunny nest in the front garden every spring. We removed most of the daylilies, so the deer have little reason to come to the house, although they still nibble the tips of azaleas planted along the drive.

What did we learn from providing such bounty to all of the critters that visited our property? The authors of VCE Publication 426-070 “Backyard Wildlife Habitats,” noted “If you build it, they will come,” a well-known line from one of my favorite films, “Field of Dreams.”

In our case, the critters most certainly came, to the point that Jim spent hours each day feeding and cleaning up after them. At some point, we realized that we have oak, hickory, beech, and dogwood trees that offer plenty of forage for residents and visitors. Echinacea, rudbeckia, and other native perennials provide seeds for yellow finches and other birds. We still fill the birdbaths daily and put out some food on the coldest days.

The marsh and woods edges provide shelter and safety from predators. Brush piles in the woods offer added security and material for nest building.

VCE Publication 426-070 provides extensive information and resources on building a backyard habitat. If we had read the article and followed its recommendations, we would have saved a lot of time, energy, and money.

The squirrels still dig in the garden.