



Water for Wildlife ¹

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Overview

Like humans, animals need water to survive. They use it for drinking, bathing and--in the case of fish and certain insects, reptiles, and amphibians--for reproduction.

Surface water sources such as puddles, raindrops on leaves, and dew on grass provide much of the water used by wildlife. Animals also get water from the foods they eat. But clean, fresh water often is scarcer than food. A lack of water can force wildlife to shun habitats that otherwise suit their needs.

Water also must be in a form available to wildlife. Lakes or canals with steeply sloping sides are virtually useless to many animals. Butterflies cannot drink any free-standing water.

A reliable source of water is almost irresistible to wildlife and an essential component of an urban backyard habitat. In the heat of summer it becomes critical. Small birds especially are prone to dehydration.

Birdbaths and small ponds are excellent ways to provide water for animals. In addition to their

wildlife value, they can serve as key focal points in residential landscapes and provide hours of viewing pleasure.

Birdbaths

Birdbaths are the most popular forms of watering stations. They range from expensive commercial models to those easily made at home. There also are naturally occurring birdbaths, such as hollowed-out tree stumps that collect rainwater.

Any watering station should be placed so predators cannot sneak up on unsuspecting bathers. Nearby brushy cover offers protection as well as perches for birds to preen. But low shrubbery too close to a birdbath can create a perfect ambush for a neighborhood cat.

In general, the lower the birdbath the more open space needed around it. Ground-level birdbaths should be at least 4.5m (15ft) away from heavy cover, while elevated baths can be placed closer to cover.

Birds prefer baths with textured bottoms that provide firm footing. You can cover smooth bottoms with pebbles or sand. Water in a birdbath should be

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no deeper than 5 to 7.5cm (2 to 3in) in the middle, and the sides of the bath should slope gently.

Commercial birdbaths are available in materials ranging from concrete, to terracotta, to plastic. Concrete models are expensive and cumbersome, but they provide excellent footing and will not budge in severe weather. A plastic birdbath may need its footing altered and its placement secured against strong winds.

The size of a birdbath is not critical, but those less than a foot in diameter probably will be used just for drinking. Baths of 61.5 to 92cm (24 to 36in) allow room for several birds to drink and bathe at the same time.

Imagination is key when it comes to homemade birdbaths. A garbage can lid, ceramic saucer, or foil pie plate will suffice. These may need pebbles or sand added to create a gentle incline and provide traction.

The sound of moving water is a special attraction for birds. Many stores and catalogs offer complete kits for birdbath fountains--at a price. A simpler method is to punch a hole in the side (not bottom) of a bucket and hang it above the birdbath. The hole should allow about 10 to 20 drops a minute to plop into the bath. Cover the bucket to keep out debris and prevent evaporation.

Keep the water in birdbaths clean and available on a consistent basis. A scrubbing every few days removes algae, which thrive in bird-fertilized water.

Butterflies

Butterflies have special requirements for drinking. They take in liquids through their proboscis: a long, hollow tube that is a sort of modified tongue.

These insects often are seen "puddling," or gathering at damp, sunny spots, where they draw moisture from mud or sand. Butterflies are incapable of drinking free-standing water, such as in a birdbath.

Use a coffee can or similar container to make a butterfly watering station. Fill the container with clean sand or earth, sink it into the ground and fill it

with water. Place rocks in the middle and at the sides for use as landing pads.

Ponds and Pools

A garden pond that supports aquatic plants as well as vegetation around its edges is ideal for attracting a variety of wildlife. Turtles, frogs, birds, snakes, lizards, and raccoons are some of the animals that use ponds.

Irregularly shaped ponds with islands in the middle are of much more value to wildlife than regularly shaped ponds. The extra nooks and crannies provide greater habitat diversity and attract more species.

Aquascaping with aquatic and wetland plants also enhances a pond's wildlife value. Desirable plants range from bald cypress and blue flag iris for shorelines to pickerelweed and arrowhead for shallow water.

A typical pond planting includes four zones, from completely exposed to completely submerged plants. Pond edges should have a gradual slope of at least 6:1, with no more than 1 unit of descent per 6 units of length as shown in Figure 1.

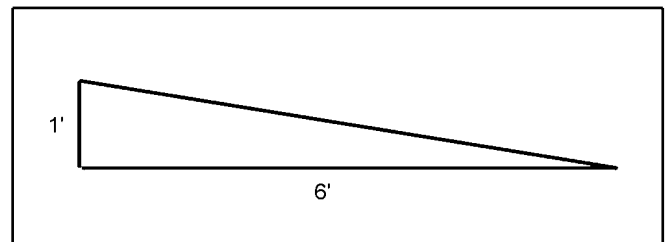


Figure 1. The specified gradual slope of pond edges.

Once aquascaping is completed, have a regular maintenance program in place that ensures the success of desirable plants and prevents the invasion of cattails, hydrilla, and other undesirables. If your scale is small, pre-formed pools are available at many retail outlets or you can be construct one. These range from elaborate structures with pumps and fountains to a simple container. Some pre-formed pools--designed for fish--are too steep for birds. Customize these by adding rocks above the pool surface to serve as landing pads. Add some below the surface, as well. Place the pool so that tree branches overhang its surface, serving as perches.

One easy option is to bury a large birdbath basin, leaving its lip protruding about 5cm (2in) above the ground. Fill an area 30.5cm (1ft) or so from the edge of the basin with gravel to a depth of 8 to 10cm (3 to 4in).

Many retail outlets and catalogs provide complete how-to kits for ponds and pools. Further details on aquascaping are available from your county extension office. County extension office information is available on the World Wide Web at:

http://www.ifas.ufl.edu/www/county/state_tx.htm? (All-text Website)

or

<http://www.ifas.ufl.edu/www/county/graphmap.htm?> (Graphic-intensive Website)

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