

PLENTIFUL FOOD FOR THE BIRDS

This is a general guide by which a habitat gardener can have resources available for birds in their garden at all times of the year. The most important thing to remember is to include a lot of plants that attract and sustain insect populations. Also, preserve and protect an established healthy tree, even if it's not a native species, because most trees provide cover and nesting sites and often some form of food as well. Avoid any major pruning work on trees and large shrubs during the nesting season; schedule this kind of work between September and February.

January

Manzanitas are usually in full bloom, pollinated by mason bees. Manzanitas "little apples" ripen by summer; lots of birds eat these fruits. Anna's hummingbirds sometimes breed very early in the year, so they may also be foraging for nesting materials.

In shady woodlands, perennial wildflowers like buttercups and milkmaids are just starting to bloom, attracting pollinating insects and producing seeds later. Sometimes the pink-flowering currants are starting their display and, in the fall when the fruits have set, all sorts of birds come to partake of the berries.

February

Brandegee's sage is usually the first of the native salvias to bloom; golden currant and some gooseberry species are also blooming. The seeds of the salvia are ripe by late spring, and then the finches are busy feeding on them. Finches take the seeds but are messy, dropping many seeds while they feed. Sparrows and juncos then forage for seeds and insects in the duff.

Cool season native bunchgrasses, like California fescue and tufted hairgrass, are often in bloom. Perennial grasses provide cover for insects and nesting materials for birds, but the seeds that set later in the season are food for all sorts of creatures.

March

By this time the *ceanothus* start to bloom, one species after another, until about the end of April. The clusters of tiny flowers attract numerous insects, and the birds that feed on them. A number of songbirds like finches and sparrows also eat the flowers as well as the seeds that ripen about a month later.

The fresh, new, leafy growth of various *ceanothus* species hosts the larvae of several butterfly species. Sad to say, especially for the butterfly lover, but all those soft-bodied caterpillars are excellent food for songbird nestlings!

Toward the end of March, the barberries and redbuds burst into bloom, creating a spectacular show of color and attracting all sorts of bees and butterflies, themselves food for birds. Hummingbirds also forage among the masses of flowers.

April

By this time of year many native annual wildflowers are in full bloom. Seaside daisies are also blooming by April, as is yet another native salvia species, purple sage. The insects attracted to these plants include lots of pollinators, as well as plant-feeders, and the predatory insects that feed on them. Mid-season grasses, like purple needlegrass, are in bloom. When seeds have set, there is plenty for all creatures.

California's flora is particularly rich in berry-producing shrubs; many will be blooming in spring and ripen fruits towards the end of summer. Osoberry and snowberry grow nicely as understory shrubs; beneath the shrubs, try a spreading cover of wild strawberries. Even more berry-producing shrubs thrive in riparian habitats, including twinberry, blackberry, thimbleberry and salmonberry.

May

Usually in mid-May, the showy milkweed puts on a spectacularly beautiful display. Milkweeds also produce ample seed and each seed has a silky "parachute" attached. This is wonderful nesting material for the birds that breed a little later in the season.

Salvias and the sticky monkeyflowers bloom all through this month. Hummingbirds trapline drifts of these shrubs, and when I'm lucky, I'll even spot an Allen's or Rufous hummingbird fueling up to continue on their migration north.

Also blooming in May: buckwheat, checkerbloom, flowering native bulbs like blue dicks and tulip lilies, and still more wildflowers. There are numerous native buckwheats. The flowers attract all sorts of pollinators and seed set can be prolific. Even better, the seed heads persist on the plant right through the winter months, providing food for resident and migrant species alike.

June to July

Native salvias like Cleveland's sage, black sage, and white sage are in full bloom, but this is usually the end of the really show-stopping floral displays in my native garden. The hummers in the neighborhood are taking full advantage of all the flowers have to offer. Even the tiny, barely open flowers of the California bee plant (*scrophularia*) attract the hummers, as well as native bees and other insects.

In the woodlands, coffeeberry and elderberry are often in bloom, producing fruit later in the summer. The soft red berries of Nevin's barberry ripen by early June; in my garden the fruit set is prolific. All sorts of birds come for these fruits, which can persist on the plant for six months or more. Even the deer eat the berries, carefully nibbling at them in between the very spiky leaves.

July to August

Toyon starts to bloom in June or July; berries will be set by fall, but ripen slowly and persist until December or January, providing resources easily seen by large flocks of migrating songbirds.

Island bush snapdragon's bright red flowers attract the hummingbirds and brighten up the shade under the oaks. The white flowers of soap lilies open in the late afternoon, attracting lots of bumblebees as well as nighttime pollinators like moths.

Berries are formed and ripening on snowberries in the woodlands, and in riparian zones, creek dogwood and twinberries are blooming; the subsequent berries are relished by birds and other creatures.

This is when the tarweeds are at their best. The fragrant flowers are abundant throughout the summer and well into fall; they are especially attractive to native longhorned bees. When seed has set, flocks of goldfinches forage through the drifts of tarweed.

More buckwheats are in bloom: the shrubby, narrow-leaf buckwheat, and the giant St. Catherine's Lace. Once seeds have set, the flowering heads become an attractive rusty color and persist on the plant through the fall and winter months.

September to October

California fuchsias, goldenrods, asters and gumplants are blooming, creating another glorious show. The red-flowering fuchsias are hummingbird magnets, especially important for migrating Allen's and Rufous hummingbirds.

Goldenrod, but most especially asters (of all species, even non-natives) are excellent insect attractors; every bee and butterfly in the neighborhood is foraging at these flowers. While foraging, these insects are also pollinating, and both the resulting seeds, and the chaff that forms around the seeds provides a valuable resource for birds.

Coyote brush is an important source of both pollen and nectar in the fall garden. Studies have shown up to 400 species of insects associate with coyote brush, making it a very valuable resource for all sorts of bird life.

Wax myrtle berries have set and lots of birds are drawn to these. There may also be remnants of elderberries, currants, and even native grapes.

During these months, flowers for hummingbirds are sparse, so thinking as a habitat gardener, I have numerous non-native salvias throughout my garden. Many South American species are in full bloom from October to January, and Anna's hummingbirds definitely appreciate them! I have not found that any of these non-native salvias have become potentially invasive.

November to December

Toyon berries are red and fully ripened; flocks of both resident and migratory birds gorge on them. Warm season bunchgrasses like deer grass, Idaho fescue, and blue grama have set seeds, and on some of the late blooming plants, like asters and goldenrods, seeds sometimes are still an available food source.

This is the time of year when the seeds and mast of established, mature trees become the most valuable food source for birds. These include California's native oaks, which are especially important, California bay, madrone, buckeye, big leaf maples, alders, willows, conifers, and native cherries—both the holly-leaf and the Catalina cherry.

Fruit trees are always a valuable addition to a habitat garden, as are vegetables. Most animals, including many birds, really like human foods. Some birds, such as tanagers and orioles, rely heavily on soft fruits, and other birds like sparrows want their spring greens! The difficulty for the gardener, whose hard work and attention to these trees makes them a rich resource, is that these creatures don't always realize that they should take only a share of the bounty!