

Backyards prove surprising havens for native birds

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Is a robin eating backyard pokeweed berries a welcome visitor or weed-spreading nuisance? Credit, C. Whelan.

Many of us lavish attention on our front yards, spending precious weekend hours planting, mowing, and manicuring the plants around our homes to look nice for neighbors and strangers passing by. But from the point of view of our feathered friends, our shaggy backyards are far more attractive.

So found ecologist Amy Belaïre when she surveyed human and avian residents in 25 Cook County neighborhoods in suburban Chicago. She will present her research during the 100th Annual Meeting of the Ecological Society of America on August 9-14, during a session on Urban Ecosystems that also includes Caroline Dingle's observations on

how [birds](#) modulate their songs to be heard over the noise of daily life in Hong Kong, and Kara Belinsky's exploration of how many trees it takes to make a forest (from a bird's point of view) in suburban New York.

Belaire, a natural resources manager and education and research coordinator at St. Edward's University's Wild Basin Creative Research Center in Austin, Tex., and her colleagues Lynne Westphal (USDA Forest Service) and Emily Minor (University of Illinois Chicago) asked people about their perceptions and awareness of birds in their neighborhoods and how they felt about having birds around their homes. They also asked about the yard design and management choices that residents make in both front and back yards. The researchers also looked at socioeconomic factors and used statistical analysis to tease out the relative importance on yard management choices of neighbors, factors like income, and perceptions of local birds.

"The cool thing about this is how much it reveals about backyards," said Belaire. "Our most interesting take-away is that backyards tend to be treasure troves of ecological resources. It's where you find a lot of factors helpful to native birds—more vegetation complexity, more plants bearing fruits and berries—and more design with the intention of attracting birds."

When planting and cultivating their front yards, people seemed most motivated by what their neighbors were doing. But in managing backyards, perceptions of birds became important to residents. This suggests that local birds may motivate stewardship. People enjoyment of and appreciation for birds appears to translate into on-the-ground effects, at least in backyards.

Belaire found a surprising 36 bird species living in or passing through the Chicago neighborhoods. In landscapes increasingly sublimated to human industry, parks and yards within cities are potentially essential

habitat for local birds as well as oases for birds stopping by on long seasonal migrations. Belaïre and colleagues want to know what motivates people in the design of their yards, and what yard elements matter the most to the birds.

Models of her data indicated that the resources in groups of neighboring yards were, as clusters, more important for predicting the diversity and distribution of bird species than measurements of whole neighborhood, or landscape scale, tree cover. In Cook County, backyards with more trees, especially a mix of evergreen and broadleaf trees, more fruit and berries, and fewer outdoor cats had more native bird species. Bird feeders did not have an effect on the number and diversity of birds.

Belaïre said she and her colleagues were cheered by the excellent response rate to the survey and the overall enthusiasm of [residents](#).

"I think it was because of the subject matter. Birds are something that people care about and are excited about," she said. "I was surprised by how much people enjoyed being part of a scientific study and felt honored to be asked."

The importance of yard-scale land management choices in boosting the presence of native [bird species](#) in urban areas was also encouraging for its implications for outreach programs. The efforts of individuals can make a difference and many people care about outcomes for birds. In the future, people may even be influenced by neighbors to make changes that could help birds thrive.

"It's empowering," said Belaïre. "Every little bit matters."

Provided by Ecological Society of America

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