



A Fine Feathered Festival

Learn the essential elements that are needed to create a year-round party in your yard for birds and butterflies.

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Have you been to an office party featuring straight-back chairs, zero décor, and boxes of cold pizza? Wholly sterile and uninspired. This is what one of our native birds must feel like when she enters a classic well-groomed xeriscape yard carpeted with gravel and sporting a token tree and a few non-native shrubs. Sure, there is a seed feeder hanging from a branch, but *where is the fresh food?* The spaces for lounging? And how about the company? The feeders are overrun with English sparrows and pigeons — an intimidating crowd for our more retired feathered friend. Our bird's Yelp review: Boring, stale food, too crowded. Rating: one star (would have given it zero if she could).

So what makes a great party? Comfortable seating and spaces that invite you to linger, delicious food and interesting (non-monopolizing) guests. Create these elements outdoors and you can turn your landscape into a destination for native birds and pollinators.

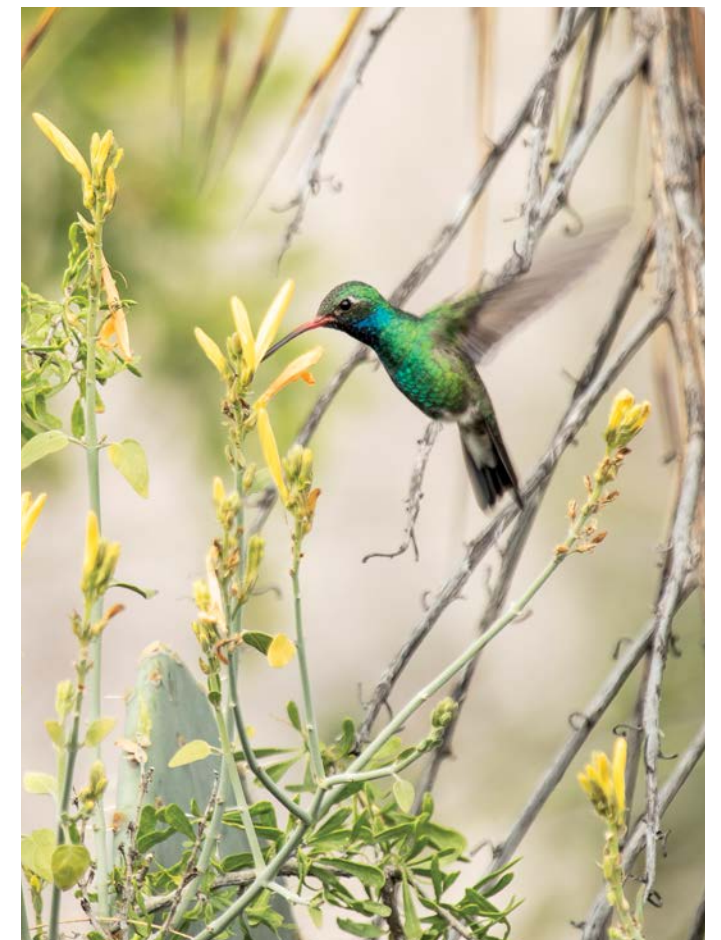
Essentials for a Great (Wildlife) Party

The Food

Forget what you know about bird feeding, and put away the seed feeder and the hummingbird feeder. Have you thought about where the birdseed that you purchase is grown? Or about the quantity of herbicide/pesticide that is applied to produce it? We humans are told to “know our farmer,” but do we know our birdseed farmer? And what about our hummingbird feeders? We know they attract bees, ants, woodpeckers, and can transfer disease if not cleaned thoroughly and frequently. Is it really healthy for hummingbirds to mainline sugar water rather than obtaining nectar from flowers?

There is a better way to feed birds and enjoy their presence in your yard, and these strategies won't leave you with lingering doubts.

The majority of birds are not principally seed eaters. When birds feed their young, the chief food provided is insects. The main birds observed at seed feeders are ones we don't aim to attract — namely sparrows, doves, and pigeons (yes, we know you see quail, cardinals and goldfinches as well, but there are better ways to attract them — keep reading). By seed feeding, we are supporting these species at the expense of other non-seed-eating species (they also take up scarce nesting spaces and valuable resources).



Opposite: A verdin, with insect in beak, approaches its nest in desert hackberry to feed its young.

Above: Broad-billed hummingbird feeds on a chuparosa blossom.

Seed feeding encourages other unwanted guests as well — rodents eat fallen seed, and that, in turn, entice snakes into the yard. Like a gateway drug, seed feeding turns into calls to the exterminator (to eliminate packrats) and fire department (for snake relocation), and at its worst the death of hawks and owls that have consumed poisoned rodents.

And hummingbirds can't survive on nectar/sugar water alone. Insects comprise up to 75 percent of a hummingbird's diet. Have you noticed them perched at the top of a tree, watching for insects? At my home, hummingbirds forage for fruit flies over the compost pit.

So forget the "fast food," and instead provide a spread of fresh insects, berries, and seeds still on the plant. It's easier than you may think — just select a few of the MVPs (Most Valuable Plants) profiled on the next spread.

What about food for butterflies? Most butterflies aren't fussy about the flowers that they use for nectar, but they are very particular about which plants they will lay their eggs on. This is because the butterfly larvae (caterpillars) rely on the leaves and stems of certain plants for food. For instance, monarch caterpillars feed on milkweeds, the caterpillars of snouts feed on hackberry. See the sidebar for plant species in addition to our MVPs to provide food for both caterpillars and butterflies, nectar for hummingbirds, and great color for your garden.

The Drinks

Fresh water will be enjoyed by birds, butterflies, lizards, and more. You can provide water using a shallow saucer. Keep the bowl and water clean and include a rock for easy landing. Placing the dish on a pedestal will lessen the chance of predation from cats. Butterflies get moisture as well as essential salts and nutrients from wet soil. Make sure to provide a sunny area free of rock to facilitate their "mud-puddling."

The Venue

Want to ensure that the winged guests on your list show up? Create safe and comfortable areas for them to roost. Trees provide places for birds to perch and search for insects. Butterflies appreciate the shade and often hang out on the trunks. Low-growing shrubs allow ground-foraging birds protection while they eat (cactus wrens, Gambel's quails and Abert's towhees all spend a significant amount of time on the ground foraging). And don't forget to accommodate overnight guests: dense, thorny shrubs



Clockwise from above: A glazed saucer, filled by a drip emitter, serves as a simple water source for this lesser goldfinch. Flower buds of aloysia are a favorite food of the lesser goldfinch. Native plants are the feeders for Lucy's warbler.



are favorite roosting spots for many of our native birds.

Birds need places to hide from predators and perceived threats. Be sure to include "escape cover" in your yard — sprawling plants like prickly pear or shrubs such as wolfberry and hackberry. Have you ever disturbed a covey of quail and watched them run for the nearest cover? Take note of the cover, and replicate this in your yard. Safe spaces won't be used only by birds; lizards and rabbits will appreciate your thoughtfulness as well.

While you are waiting for your plants to grow, start a brush pile in your yard. This collection of small branches or plant material will provide instant protection.

When you think about comfortable spaces, consider lighting and foot/pet traffic as well. Roosting areas should be set apart from frequently used pathways, and areas that a pet could disturb. Help keep Tucson's skies dark by lowering outdoor lighting.

The Guest List

We have parties because we like to enjoy the company of others. But we have all experienced the guest that guzzles our wine, consumes our food and monopolizes the conversation. In our desert, the avian equivalents would be the ubiquitous English sparrow or

pigeon. You can't prevent these species from visiting your yard, but your plant choices can greatly affect their numbers. Sparrows and pigeons nest in palm trees, and sparrows love roosting in oleander hedges. Both species arrive in droves at seed feeders.

So how do you attract the species you want? Our native birds prefer native vegetation. For example, did you know that the presence of thorny desert scrub plants such as desert hackberry and catclaw acacia is associated with the presence of ash-throated flycatchers, Gambel's quail, northern cardinals, and verdins? The desert scrub plants provide great foraging (they host a variety of insects), protection (due to thorns and density) and nesting sites. Adding even a single, carefully placed, untrimmed MVP to your yard can increase the diversity of birds you see.

The "After-Party"

A garden composed of thoughtfully selected native plants that provide food, shelter, and nesting sites becomes self-sustaining. No worries about who will feed the birds after you and your seed feeders have departed. And don't worry, by following the strategies in this article you will have a yard full of steady visitors, including goldfinches, cardinal, and towhees. Party on!

"Spring is nature's way of saying, 'Let's party!'"

— Robin Williams



MVPs (Most Valuable Plants) for Your Landscape

The following plants have earned our MVP ranking for providing food, cover and nesting sites for our native birds. These Sonoran Desert natives are real workhorses. They provide berries and or seeds for wildlife, are pollinator attractors, can be used as defensive plantings around homes, and more. These are all mid-story plants that often are excluded in the landscape, but that play a critical role for wildlife, especially birds. Plant one or several of these in your yard to get the party started.

Whitethorn Acacia (*Vachellia constricta*)

Size (H x W) 10' x 12'

Deciduous medium shrub to small tree that provides vital habitat and food for many native birds, insects and mammals. Fragrant, yellow, puffball flower displays in spring and late summer. Hosts a variety of insects for insectivores like the verdin, vireos and warblers; seeds are favored by Gambel's quail. Larval host plant for a variety of butterflies and moths.



Wolfberry (*Lycium species*)

Size (H x W) 6' x 6' (dependent on species)

Lavender flowers are popular with hummingbirds and other pollinators. It flowers in the winter, as well in the summer in response to rain. Large orange or red berries in the spring and fall provide food for birds and animals, and are tasty for people, too. This dense, thorny shrub is perfect for protected nesting space. Drought deciduous.



Fragrant Bee Brush (*Aloysia gratissima*)

Size (H x W) 8' x 6'

Like goldfinches? Plant an aloysia. They cannot resist the vanilla-scented spikes of flowers that bloom from spring through fall (they eat the flower buds). This delicately textured thornless shrub is host to the rustic sphinx moth and a favorite nectar source for butterflies and a variety of native and European bees.



Graythorn (*Ziziphus obtusifolia*)

Size (H x W) 8' x 7'

A long branching shrub with stout thorns. Covered in black berries in the spring feasted upon by many species of bird, including phainopepla. Provides shelter and nesting sites for birds. Fruits several times each year in response to rainfall. Very popular with insects and pollinators.



Desert Hackberry (*Celtis pallida*)

Size (H x W) 12' x 8'

This dense, evergreen thorny shrub provides food and shelter to numerous species of birds, insects, and other wildlife. The one in our yard is a favorite roosting site for a covey of quail. Abundant orange fruits in the fall are edible by humans and wildlife. Butterfly larval host plant to the American snout, hackberry emperor, Empress Leila and more.



Catclaw Acacia (*Senegalia greggii*)

Size (H x W) 10' x 15'

Deliciously fragrant oblong puffballs grace this small tree in late spring. It is a favorite of many caterpillars, a great nectar plant, and wonderful forage source for insect-eating birds. Its gnarled growth form is beautiful in the landscape. Plant this where you can enjoy the fragrance, form, and many wildlife visitors while avoiding its thorns.

Butterfly and Caterpillar Buffet

These Sonoran Desert natives add color to your garden and are butterfly larval hosts as well nectar favorites.

Dalea

Dalea hosts Blues (pictured) and hairstreaks, and is a reliable winter bloomer.



Buckwheat

Queen butterfly feeding on buckwheat nectar. Host plant to several species of Blues. Buckwheat seeds are a favorite of the Abert's Towhee.



Justice

Chuparosa has a long flowering season, and varieties are available with red or yellow flowers. This plant is the host of the Checkerspot and Texas Crescent butterfly larvae, and is a favorite of hummingbirds.



Milkweed

These plants host Queen and Monarch butterfly larvae. Try either the desert milkweed or pine leaf milkweed in your yard. Both butterflies' larvae eat the leaves and stems.



Honeysuckle

Butterflies and hummingbirds love desert honeysuckles, and the plant also is host to several varieties of Checkerspots. Queen butterflies mate on desert honeysuckle leaves. **TL**