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Thinking beyond the bird feeder

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Native plants provide nectar, seeds and fruit and attract insects that native birds have naturally evolved to eat over millions of years.

By *Lishka Arata, PRBO Conservation Educator* December 3, 2009 05:11 pm

A question asked of students at the end of a bird conservation activity is, "So, how do you think you could help birds when you go home?" Often the first response from children and adults alike is, "I can feed them!"

They are usually talking about putting up a man-made bird feeder that dispenses store-bought birdseed. Continuing the discussion with the bird conservation activity audience, it's pointed out the larger more interesting context to think within when one aims to help birds at home. In order to truly help birds at home, one must think outside of the bird feeder and within an ecological framework.

The bottom line is birds are not doing so well. Bird population monitoring data, gathered and analyzed for over 40 years by PRBO Conservation Science biologists, have shown many bird species' populations are declining.

The main cause for this negative trend is loss and

degradation of habitat due to human activity such as industry, development, and pollution. Despite this discouraging news, there are effective ways everyone can help to halt and reverse this downward trend.

A holistic approach

Feeding birds is definitely one way to help them at home. While using a man-made bird feeder is fun and relatively easy, there is a much safer, more appropriate and holistic method of feeding birds. Native plants. Native plants provide nectar, seeds, and fruit and attract insects that native birds have naturally evolved to eat over millions of years. There are many native plants that are attractive to the eye and wallet as well as the bird and the bee. Since native plants are adapted to the soils and climate of the local area, they require little to no water and fertilizer maintenance, which makes them environmentally and economically friendly. Not only do native plants supply bird food, they also provide shelter from weather and predators as well as nesting spots and material, and shelter for chicks fresh out of the nest. A Coyote Bush, baccharis pilularis, could be a migratory or resident bird's one-stop shopping spot. There are endless benefits to landscaping with native plants.

The predator-prey balance

Helping to maintain a healthy predator-prey balance is another way to help birds in your neighborhood. PRBO nest monitoring data indicates predation is the primary cause of nest failure and therefore the greatest barrier to avian productivity. Predation is a natural part of the food web and ecological systems, but the introduction of exotic or non-native predators or an imbalance in predator-prey numbers can have detrimental effects on bird populations. Some ways we can all help maintain healthy predator-prey relationships in our local ecosystems include keeping domestic cats indoors, especially during the breeding season (March through August), making sure you are not supplementing avian nest predator diet such as jays, crows, or ravens with pet food left outside or bird feeders, and keeping your dog on a leash, especially during the breeding season. If your home is near a beach, these responsible actions greatly help shorebirds, like the endangered beach-nesting Snowy Plover, to survive and reproduce in open grassy fields where a variety of songbirds like sparrows nest on the ground. Awareness is the key. It is important to be aware of the fact that, like it or not, everyone is a part of the natural ecosystem and actions always have an effect on our surrounding environment. Purchasing or borrowing some binoculars and a field guide and learning about the birds living in your neighborhood is a great place to start helping birds at home. Backyard landscaping with native plants, gaining awareness of birds' needs, and being responsible pet owners are significantly effective ways to continue helping birds at home. To learn more, join Lishka Arata Dec. 7 at 7pm at the Ray Miller Community Center, 216 E. School St., Cotati (behind Cotati City Hall) or visit www.prbo.org, and/or visit your local native plant nursery.

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