

## Watching Our Backyard Wildlife

It will come as no surprise to my readers that I like wildlife. My wife and I have spent a lot of time trying to make our backyard into an inviting wildlife habitat, and we have, I think, largely succeeded.

In addition to all the native plants we have planted, both flowers and shrubs, we have nine bird feeders of various kinds: one sunflower feeder accessible to birds and, with some effort, squirrels, one platform feeder for birds, a peanut butter log, a suet feeder, a thistle feeder, and several hummingbird feeders. In addition we have a recirculating “creek” with a short waterfall and a narrow, shallow stream which flows into an underground reservoir.

So we have lots of birds of various species, and this time of year we get to watch cardinal and titmice parents feeding sunflower seeds to their fledglings on the platform feeder. The only feeder accessible to the squirrels requires them to jump from a tree limb and to hang onto the top of the feeder with their hind feet to reach down to get a seed and then do a “sit-up” to bring up the seed where they can eat it. It never gets boring watching them do this.

Not all birds eat seeds, however, and recently I had a close-up view of a wren sitting on the rock window ledge just outside my window as it was bashing a daddy-long-legs (harvestmen) on the rock to knock off the legs before it ate it. Just yesterday as I was sitting down on my favorite porch chair, I noticed a number of legs of other harvestmen and as I looked around on the porch I saw a number of legs that indicated the wren had found at least four of the long-legged critters.

This year we had the pleasure of watching a pair of barn swallows building a nest atop the floodlight on our back porch. We thought their effort in building the nest was tremendous, but it was nothing compared to what would be coming next. After the relatively low activity period of laying and incubating the eggs, the feeding process began—slowly at first and finally a constant activity in which the parents didn’t even land to feed the chicks, but would hover for less than a second and be off again in search of more insects. After the young had learned to fly, we saw what looked like “bug-hunting” lessons when a parent and a juvenile would fly off together for a short time, return for a time and repeat the flight.

We also noticed that the swallows don’t like the scrub jays. Whenever a jay would come to either the platform feeder or the suet feeder, the swallows would harass it until it left.

It is not just birds that we see in our backyard. We occasionally see a five-foot long eastern coachwhip, two different species of lizards and skinks as well—all presumably

trying to avoid the coachwhip. The covered reservoir of the “creek” is home to a few leopard frogs, and they sometimes venture out into the flowerbeds. We have also found a gulf coast toad on occasion.

The “creek” obviously attracts a number of critters we would seldom, if ever, see without it, such as mockingbirds, scarlet tanagers, robins and cedar waxwings. When wild turkeys fly into the yard to scratch for seeds under the feeders, they always stop by the creek for a drink. It is really neat to watch the hummingbirds bathing in the thin sheet of water flowing over the rocks.

We also have occasional visits in the late afternoon or evening from, usually, raccoons or foxes, again looking for spilled sunflower seeds under the feeders. An occasional cottontail or skunk can be seen. All of these critters use the creek as we are a half mile from any permanent natural water.

Finally, with the spring rains this year, the Greggs blue mistflower is in full bloom earlier than normal, and that is good because it is covered with queen butterflies—we can sometimes count 20 to 30 just from our chairs on the back porch.

Our little one acre inside our homestead high fence has a much greater biodiversity of plants than the surrounding pasture, which is part of the reason for the greater diversity of wildlife as well—just as we had hoped it would.

Until next time...

Jim Stanley is a Texas Master Naturalist and the author of the books “Hill Country Landowner’s Guide” and “A Beginner’s Handbook for Rural Texas Landowners: How to Live in the Country Without Spilling It”. He can be reached at [jstmn@kctc.com](mailto:jstmn@kctc.com). Previous columns can be seen at [www.hillcountrynaturalist.org](http://www.hillcountrynaturalist.org).