

Sharing the backyard with wildlife



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Every spring, I look forward to the return birdsong resounding through the trees in my backyard. One familiar songbird that I delight in seeing is the chatty, plump bodied Carolina wren. Rusty brown on their backs with a cinnamon-colored underside, wrens are a familiar sight foraging among brush piles and low shrubs in suburban areas. Carolina wrens have a distinctive white stripe above their eye and a narrow long tail that they often hold upwards at a jaunty angle. Though small in size and often shy, you can hear their loud tweedle, tweedle, tweedle song ringing from tree to tree as male and female pairs defend their territory.

Wrens typically nest in tree cavities, but near residential areas they will build nests in the most unlikely of places: hanging planters, light fixtures, mailboxes, you name it. I once found a nest in an old mop leaning against the back of the house. I had no idea it was there until I went to move the mop and was startled by a tiny brown rocket flying out at me. Some birds do not like to have humans close to their nests, but wrens don't seem to mind much. At the yearly Extension Master Gardener Plant Sale, our volunteer carpenters sell lovely bird houses made from recycled lumber and display them for sale near the picnic area at the New



Carolina wren [COURTESY OF JEFF HALL]

Hanover County Arboretum. A plucky male wren took advantage of the free real estate during one memorable plant sale and built his nest despite hundreds of people shopping nearby. The little wren couple zipped in and out paying no mind to anyone. We ended up leaving the nest box there and you can still see it today in the Arboretum's Herb Garden.

After laying five-six white and brown eggs, both parents work to bring food to their nestlings. Like most songbirds, wrens are insectivorous during most or all of their lives (especially when raising their young which require the protein). In the winter they will also forage for berries and small fruits.

Though songbirds like wrens are a common sight, the survival of birds as a whole is under increasing threat. A 2019 study in the journal Science reported a 29% decline in bird breeding populations in the US

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Native shrubs like beautyberry can provide cover and late season food for birds and other wildlife. [CONTRIBUTED PHOTO]

WILDLIFE

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and Canada. That's a loss of almost 3 billion birds from 1970 to 2017. The researchers from Cornell Lab of Ornithology point to habitat loss as one of driving factors of this decline. There are a number of things we can do to help, including creating habitat in our own backyards to support wildlife. Native trees, grasses, and shrubs provide cover, nest sites, and food for birds. These native plants commonly

harbor butterfly and moth caterpillars essential for the diets of many birds.

If you are interested in creating a sustainable and diverse ecosystem where you live, NC Cooperative Extension will be hosting an online Backyard Sustainability series this spring.

Classes will cover native plants for wildlife, creating a pollinator garden, trees for resiliency and more. You'll also learn ways to manage the waste that we produce through composting, how to recycle right, and reducing food waste.

Classes will be held virtually on Wednesday evenings starting March 10. For more information or to sign up for the class series, visit <https://brunswick.ces.ncsu.edu/backyard-sustainability/>.

The Arboretum is free and open to the public every day from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. It is located at 6206 Olean-Der Drive in Wilmington.

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