Birds, Bees, and Native Trees

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At 5:30pm last Friday, my partner Cody and I were standing in the middle of a quiet New Haven street a few neighborhoods away from our own, staring up into the dense crown of a 40-foot-tall White Pine tree. It was just the two of us at first, smiling and quietly observing through binoculars, intending to stay only a few minutes – but within 30 seconds, we started attracting a crowd.

An older woman with an impatient tan labradoodle marched up to ask what we were looking at. A couple on their evening walk paused to inquire if we worked for the natural history museum. A family of five scrambled out of the house just beneath the tree, the three young boys eager to know what we were doing and if we had found them and could they see?!

The excited crowd grew quickly. Cody went back to his car to retrieve his spotting scope – a telescope-like contraption usually used to observe distant ocean birds from the shore – and pointed it up at the crook in the branches so everyone could take a peek at the gigantic, fluffy, marshmallow-like baby peering wide-eyed out of the nest. Despite its youth – the chick was likely only a few weeks old – it was already nearly the size of its imposing mother: a 2.5-foot-tall Great Horned Owl who stared imperiously down at us with sharp amber eyes from her watchful perch beside the nest.

The neighborhood was enthralled. The family whose yard held the big tree told us about how they'd been hearing the owl parents hooting at each other for months; the kids from across the street told us about the Red-Tailed Hawks who had built that nest the previous year; a lady with two extremely grumpy corgis stopped to let us know that a famed ecologist used to live just down the street, right across from where the owls were now, what a coincidence! Up and down and up and down the spotting scope went, readjusted to the heights of first the dog-walking woman, then the five-year-old boy clutching a miniature pair of binoculars, then his sheepish mom, so that everyone could have a good look at their striking new neighbors.

Great Horned Owls
(*Bubo virginianus*)

Admittedly, I had planned to observe these owls quietly without socializing with every inhabitant of the block, but it turned into a nice reminder of how much joy backyard wildlife can inspire. I have every confidence that the three kids whose house abuts the owl tree will keep a close watch over it, and that their parents will take good care of that tree in the future. I have every hope that the boy with binoculars will grow up to be quite the birder, and that the woman who happily listed off all the cardinals, finches, and jays who had recently visited her feeder will keep an eye out for more nesting birds settling nearby.

But how can they actually make that happen? Plenty of us would love to see amazing wildlife every day, but most of us won't be lucky enough as to have a Great Horned Owl nest built in view of our kitchen windows. How can we turn what space we do have into one that will attract and welcome whatever wildlife we can?

As spring starts to blossom, we're reaching one of the absolute best times of year to ask this question. Now is the time to plan gardens, resume lawn care, and consider what sort of care we'll offer our greenspaces this summer. And while I can't promise you that you'll be able to attract any owl nests with your landscaping, I can promise you that there are innumerable ways to make sure your yard welcomes as many critters as possible. Here are a few of the most important:

1. **Don't kill native stuff.** That means leaving big trees standing so they can support the rest of the habitat, letting leaves and mulch linger to protect slumbering bees and caterpillars, and – above all – keeping chemicals out of the equation as much as possible. While there are some limited uses of pesticides that can be beneficial to the environment, any time a wide swath of land is being sprayed with pesticides, insecticides, or rodenticides, it is extremely likely that those poisons are going to kill more things than they are intended to. These toxins massacre enormous numbers of native bees and caterpillars vital for pollinating our plants. Poisoned bugs are eaten by vulnerable baby birds, or else swallowed by fish and subsequently harming eagles; poisoned rodents are well-known for killing off raptors at an alarming rate. Letting biodiversity linger in bug- and flower-filled lawns benefits every living thing in the area (including you!). This is a good one to remember as we enter No-Mow-May!


Pearl Crescent on Black-Eyed Susans
(*Phyciodes tharos* & *Rudbeckia hirta*)

2. **Don't plant invasive stuff.** As much as you can, be conscious of what you are putting into your gardens; choosing native plants over invasive ones is crucial for making your greenspace beneficial to local ecosystems. This does, unfortunately, require a bit of research; deceptive labeling of non-native plants as 'pollinator friendly' or 'butterfly attracting' is extremely common. Make sure that 'pollinator friendly' flowers are actually native by looking them up (using the scientific name provided on the tag works best; I haven't found a perfect database for this, but a quick search on iNaturalist or Wikipedia can usually give you some idea of its native range); species like Butterfly Bush are

widely marketed for pollinators because the flowers do attract butterflies, but it is also an invasive which no caterpillars can actually eat (making it useless for butterfly reproduction; try Butterfly Milkweed instead!). 'Wildflower seed mixes' are another common trap; they advertise beneficial flowers, but many include noxious invasive species to live up to their promise of growing a lot of flowers very quickly. Look carefully at the list of species included before planting – or just select individual species yourself. Keep an eye out for the 'deer resistant' labels, too; this can just mean that the plant is so invasive that our native deer find it unpalatable. These can still be tempting given how many deer we have trying to eat our gardens, but try out this list of deer-resistant natives from the Audubon society first – they're just as pretty, and much better for our wildlife!


native New England Aster
(*Symphyotrichum novae-angliae*)

3. **Support your local food web.** The issues caused by sweeping lawns and ornamental gardens is not so much about the things themselves, but about the system they are a part of. Your land is taking up space, and your decisions about how to manage it determine whether that space hurts or helps everything else in the area: the water, the air, the plants, and the animals. It's hard to manage these spaces in perfect harmony with the natural world, but it's easy to manage them just a little bit better by being intentional about how we're using them. That might mean turning off unnecessary lights, especially during big bird migration nights (sign up for text alerts about these from CT Audubon here!). It might mean incorporating more native plants – especially the 'keystone' species that support some 90% of all our caterpillars – into your landscaping (check out this database to look at the most beneficial species you can plant in your region; Kent is in the Atlantic Highlands!). It might mean getting out there and pulling some invasive weeds, or not spraying pesticides, or shrinking your lawn altogether. If you want to do more but don't know how, I highly recommend looking up Pollinator Pathways and the work of Doug Tallamy, who offers thorough, accessible, inspiring research on how and why to create habitat on private lands – which encompass well over half the country (start here!).


migrant White-Eyed Vireo hunting on a white oak
(*Vireo griseus* & *Quercus alba*)

Though these actions may feel small, their impacts are felt widely. Even tiny areas containing the food, habitat, or resources a species needs, sometimes called a *microhabitat*, can provide a crucial refuge in an increasingly urbanized world. These impacts become especially visible to me this time of year; I often spot flocks of migrating warblers happily hunting bugs in the

street trees on my walk into work, but only on those streets growing native oaks instead of the far more popular Japanese Cherries, Bradford Pears, and Norway Maples (beautiful trees, but inedible to our bugs and thus uninhabitable by our birds).

Blackburnian Warbler hunting in a street-side Pin Oak (*Setophaga fusca* & *Quercus palustris*)

And the side effects of *not* caring for nature can be deadly. When we first heard about the neighborhood Great Horned Owls this spring, I was hopeful that they were the same pair of owls we had seen last year in a neighborhood park a few blocks away. I soon learned that they couldn't be; that pair had been found dead soon after their chicks fledged, killed by rodenticides in the blood of their prey. Though the park they had lived in avoids toxic chemicals with secondhand effects, someone in the neighborhood was less careful – and the cost was those owls' lives. It's an irony and a tragedy that we are losing so many birds of prey in this way: a single Great Horned Owl will happily eat over 1200 rats a year. The rodenticides are killing the very species that would control rodent populations on their own, if only they could be conserved.

There is no better time than today to take action on these issues. Butterfly populations declined by 22% between 2000 and 2020. Bird populations have dropped by a quarter since 1970. We're losing these species now, and we're losing them fast. We can't save every individual, but we can at least take action in our own communities – and that's where your yard planning comes into play. Spring ephemerals are blooming, songbirds are migrating south, and bumblebees are on the hunt for pollen. As the trees finally start turning green again, think about what steps you can take to make your greenspace a place for them as well as a place for yourself. You never know what critters – big, fluffy owls included – might end up settling in your backyard.

Azure Bluets (*Houstonia caerulea*)