

Native Plant Gardening for Birds in Southern California

Betsey Landis © October 20, 2006

Birds in general require resting, nesting, and food sources. In planning a garden with native plants the goal is to supply the needs of many local and migratory bird species, because diversity prevents one species - such as pigeons, starlings or crows - from dominating the landscape, perhaps ruining the garden.

Structure of the garden is important. Tall trees - California sycamore (*Platanus racemosa*) and coast live oak (*Quercus agrifolia*) - are wonderful hosts for many birds, from woodpeckers to hummingbirds to hawks and owls, if the garden is large. Both tree species require a lot of space. Either a hedge or a grouping of tall and short shrubs (small trees and short shrubs) is necessary to provide dense canopy for small birds - goldfinches, lesser finches, bushtits, towhees, warblers, sparrows, Bewick wrens and many others - to hide from predators, to nest in, to act as food sources with buds, seeds and fruit. Try golden currant (*Ribes aureum*), fuchsia-flowered gooseberry (*Ribes speciosum*), toyon (*Heteromeles arbutifolia*), Mexican elderberry (*Sambucus mexicana*), laurel sumac (*Malosma laurina*), holly leaf cherry (*Prunus ilicifolia*) or holly leaf redberry (*Rhamnus ilicifolia*).

For food sources that provide bright flowers for the garden as well as insects, fruit, and seeds for birds, try bush sunflower (*Encelia californica*), canyon sunflower (*Venegasia carpesioides*), Penstemons (i.e. *Penstemon spectabilis*), monkeyflower (*Mimulus aurantiacus*) and all the sages (*Salvia spathecea*, *S. apiana*, *S. leucophylla*, *S. mellifera*). Hummingbirds like trumpet-like flowers, and so do orioles.

Heart-leaved penstemon (*Keckiella cordifolia*) and honeysuckle (*Lonicera hispidula*), bushes that bower over walls and low fences, attract many birds with late-flowering or sweet flowers, resident tasty caterpillars and other insects, and shady safety. Vines such as virgin's bower (*Clematis lasiantha*) or wild grape (*Vitis girdiana*) also work well for wrens, thrushes, sparrows and finches. Thrashers, robins, towhees and other ground-feeders need leaf litter to scratch in as they search for bugs and worms. The native plants recycle their leaves back into the ground to return nutrients to their roots so leaf litter is important for the whole garden.

The main threats to birds in southern California are gardeners with leaf-blowers, pest control services that spray too frequently for insects outside the house, and early spring brush clearance requirements that push some homeowners to employ crews to prune out protective canopy, to destroy nests in trees, bushes and on the ground and to remove all cover for young fledglings in the spring. Migratory birds are especially vulnerable as they need to rest and feed before nesting. Hence they are caught in the midst of their nesting season when landscapes are laid bare, their nestlings visible to predators and their nests overheated by the sun. Thoughtful gardeners weed regularly and schedule pruning over a period of time that allows the season's crop of young birds to develop their flight feathers in safety, then let the birds do pest control in the garden.