

Create the Habitat and the Animals Will Come

by Anne Owen, Audubon at Home Ambassador



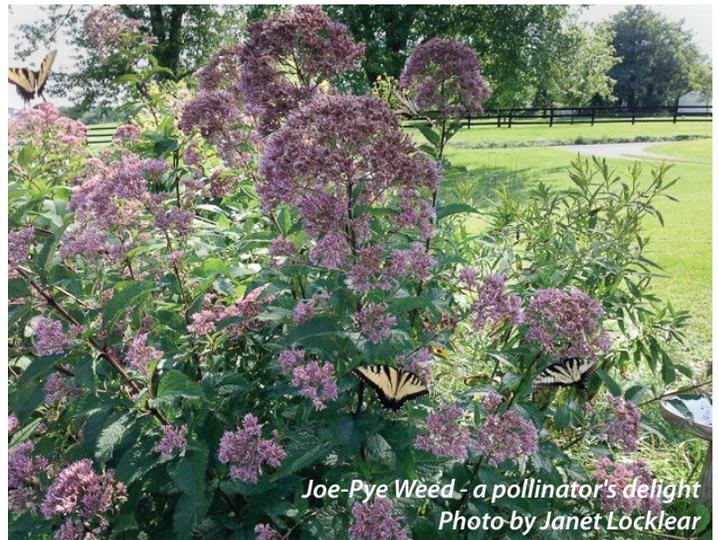
Monarch on Milkweed
Photo by Janet Locklear



Spicebush Swallowtail on Milkweed
Photo by Janet Locklear



Tiger Swallowtail on Wild Bergamont (*Monarda fistulosa*)
Photo by Janet Locklear



Joe-Pye Weed - a pollinator's delight
Photo by Janet Locklear

When long-time Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy member Janet Locklear purchased her property a little over 10 years ago, she had an area of woodland, including some beautiful, mature, native trees, but also a large expanse of lawn, where in her words “there was no activity.”

Janet had a passion for birds and had spent many years as the Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy Bluebird Coordinator, but a talk by Doug Tallamy, author of *Bringing Nature Home*, kick-started her appreciation for the vital role that we can all play in providing healthy habitat for wildlife in our own backyards, so she signed up for Audubon at Home.

Like many of us, she started out in a modest way, attending a Native Plant Sale and going home with Milkweed, Joe-Pye Weed, Asters, and Goldenrod, all of which are key perennials for supporting



pollinators. At the same time, she selected an area of her yard to simply let grow wild. While she has continued to add new native plants, those original selections have become established and now self-seed to populate new areas. She is even happy to let Milkweeds grow amongst her vegetable plot.

The new habitat has indeed attracted a variety of new critters, and Janet's own interests have broadened. A great benefit to developing habitat that is beneficial for one group of species, such as butterflies, is also beneficial to others, such as native bees, and in turn to the birds that need caterpillars and grubs to raise their chicks. Last year Janet raised and released over 150 Monarchs, all fed and raised on Milkweed from her property. Now, she is increasingly interested in the native bees that are also coming to the pollinator plants. She has seen bumble bees, carpenter bees, digger wasps, and clearwing moths to name a few. She has a healthy population of birds, including Red-bellied and Downy Woodpeckers, Northern Cardinals, Chipping Sparrows, White-breasted Nuthatches, Eastern Bluebirds, Northern Mockingbirds, Gray Catbirds, Eastern Phoebes, and Chimney Swifts.

Janet's advice is to try to not do too much and become overwhelmed - pick your battles! She plans to continue to reduce the amount of lawn on the property and wants to do more with sedges and native grasses. At the same time, she is adding shrubs to provide more habitat variety and is also moving some oak seedlings in the hope of encouraging new trees. It's all a learning process.

Janet says that the biggest challenge is to find as much time as she would like to spend on her wildlife habitat, but the first thing that she likes to do when she gets home from her commute is to grab her binoculars or camera and head out to the wild area. Where it was previously quiet, there is now continuous activity and that is a great source of pleasure and relaxation.

If you would like to find out more about providing habitat for wildlife on your own property and the Audubon at Home program, please contact Ann Garvey at agarvey@loudounwildlife.org for more information.



The property – before
habitat gardens
Photo by Janet Locklear



The property – after wildlife
gardens established
Photo by Janet Locklear



Bumblebee doing its job pollinating
Photo by Janet Locklear



Native bee having a feast
Photo by Janet Locklear

How to Create a Backyard Oasis in the Suburbs

by Anne Owen, Audubon at Home Ambassador



Blue Dasher
Photos by Allison and Bryan



Five Lined Skink
Photos by Allison and Bryan



Coopers Hawk
Photos by Allison and Bryan

Within a few short years Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy members Allison and Bryan have turned their backyard into a small but thriving oasis of native plantings in a typical suburban neighborhood — and they also have a spectacular list of critter sightings. They have recorded 35 species of butterflies, six of dragonflies, frogs, Five-lined and Broad-headed Skinks, and nearly 70 species of birds, including American Redstarts, Magnolia Warblers, Common Yellowthroats, Ruby-throated Hummingbirds, a Fox Sparrow and even a Cooper's Hawk.

How did they do it?

Bryan explained that at the start, the yard was simply unkempt grass, with less than an inch of poor topsoil over dense clay. He wasn't even a gardener, but he was interested in butterflies, so he picked up some coneflowers (*Echinacea sp.*) and Black-eyed Susans (*Rudbeckia sp.*). Because of the poor soil, the plants were put into pots — and that also meant they could be moved around until they were in an ideal spot to flourish. The splash of color they provided served as a great motivator for the homeowners to keep going.

As the butterflies started to visit, Bryan learned that to complete their lifecycle, butterflies need host plants for their caterpillars, as well as nectar for themselves. The addition of two raised beds added growing space for a wider variety of important native plants like coreopsis, Joe-Pye Weed (*Eutrochium sp.*) and bee balm (*Monarda sp.*), and that brought in hummingbirds too.

Allison takes up the story: "We wanted to attract dragonflies, so we made a container water-garden at the edge of the deck. We added a second one at the front of the house by placing the container on the ground and building up a raised bed around it. Not only did the dragonflies arrive, but frogs too." In fact, adding the water features was a turning point, with many more critters turning up.

Allison and Bryan leave the forbs standing through the winter to provide seeds for birds and overwintering sites for critters such as native wasps, bees and spiders. In the spring they transfer the clippings to a small brush pile, which has recently hosted Five-lined and Broad-headed Skinks.

They continue to develop their garden. Says Bryan, "Some plants do well and others don't, so we are learning all the time." Some plants do "too well" and can threaten to overrun a small yard, so they have to be either trimmed back, like New York Ironweed, (*Vernonia noveboracensis*), or pulled, like Mountain Mint, (*Pycnanthemum sp.*). Working with the plants gives the homeowners great opportunities to closely observe the variety of pollinators that visit.

Like many other gardeners, Allison and Bryan have to work within the guidelines of their HOA. That has factored into their selection and placement of plants, but it has not been a significant limitation. Their advice to anyone hoping to follow in their footsteps is to take small steps and undertake only a few modest projects each year. Doing too much too soon can be overwhelming.

Allison and Bryan's property was certified as a Wildlife Sanctuary by Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy Audubon at Home in 2016. If you would like to find out more about providing habitat for wildlife on your own property and the Audubon at Home program, please contact Anne Owen at aowen@loudounwildlife.org for more information.



Bird Feeding Station
Photos by Allison and Bryan



Raised Beds
Photos by Allison and Bryan



Side Yard Before and After



Front Yard Before and After



Transforming Grassland and Lawn to Meadow

by Anne Owen, Audubon at Home Ambassador



Before its transformation, this meadow was just a lawn behind the house. Photo by Abby Seeley



After the transformation, a hummingbird moth, *Hemaris thysbe*, visits Monarda in this lawn-turned-meadow. Photo by Abby Seeley

In the late summer of 2016, within four weeks of moving to their new property, Abby and Marc Seeley asked Audubon at Home (AAH) for a visit to their 11 acres in rural Western Loudoun. The acreage is mostly wooded, but even so, it took Marc more than six hours to mow the area given over to lawn grass! Abby has gardened for wildlife for many years, and the couple was looking for ideas that would make the property more manageable, and also benefit the wildlife that they both so very much enjoy.



Meadow in winter. Photo by Abby Seeley



Grasses flower in the 'slow turnover' meadow. Photo by Abby Seeley



A Silvery Checkerspot butterfly, *Chlosyne nycteis*, enjoys the Black-eyed Susans and Monarda in the former lawn during its second summer as a meadow. Photo by Abby Seeley

In the course of walking the property, the AAH team noticed an area of grassland that Marc had left standing alongside their access road and realized that amongst the non-native fescue grass were some exciting native grasses, including Purpletop. That sparked a discussion about the possibility of developing this area into a meadow. Abby and Marc loved the idea. Over the next few weeks, they continued to work with the lead AAH ambassador, Ann Garvey, to come up with a plan to slowly “turn over” this area to meadow by gradually eliminating the non-native plants they found, like Multiflora Rose, and steadily increasing the diversity by adding both plants and seeds of native plants that are important to Loudoun’s native pollinators. Pulling unwanted plants disturbs the soil and risks stimulating more invasives, so Abby snips the invaders close to the ground, then carefully spritzes the cut stem with RoundUp, avoiding any insects or insect-attracting flora.

Ann also suggested that they might qualify for assistance from the Virginia Soil and Water Conservation District’s Virginia Conservation Assistance Program (VCAP). It turned out that the proposed meadow location did not have the right characteristics for VCAP support, but another area of their property would make an ideal candidate. Behind the house was a large, sloping, manicured lawn, in full sun and leading down to a drainage that joins the North Fork of Goose Creek. If they were prepared to turn that over to meadow, then they would qualify for a VCAP grant toward the costs. However, the “slow turnover” approach was going to be too slow for this second meadow — they would need to treat the whole area with weed killer to kill the lawn grass, then seed to get the transformation off to a much faster start. They also had to commit to maintain the new meadow for 10 years. After a lot of self-education, online research, and planning, Abby came up with a mix of native grasses and plants that would form the basis of a balanced ecosystem, providing living space and food for wildlife throughout the seasons. After completion of a very extensive application, they were finally notified of a grant.

continued on page 10



Photos by Abby Seeley (left to right)

Dogbane beetle, Chrysichus auratus

Eastern Box Turtle, Terrapene carolina

Bumblebee, Bombus impatiens

Northern Pearly-eye, Enodia anthedon

Great Spangled Fritillary, Speyeria cybele