

Sanctuary

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Since moving to our house in a rural subdivision, I've noticed that we're not the only ones calling this spot home. Take our bird population. The grackles appear in spring to set up their raucous housekeeping in our river birches. During the summer, I can also count on cardinals, cedar waxwings, wrens, goldfinches, purple finches, chickadees, and mourning doves moving in to build their nests and raise their young. Recently, migrating Baltimore orioles stopped through to refuel. Sometimes there's so much racket that my backyard sounds like an avian Grand Central Station.

The National Wildlife Federation's Backyard Habitat program helps households transform their backyards into creature-friendly oases. (A habitat is a place where plants and animals thrive naturally.) My family is creating a habitat because we want to provide sanctuary for our wild neighbors. The truth is, though, we also need that green space for our own spiritual sustainability.

Development is shrinking natural wildlife habitats in many places. Animals seek habitat where they can find it, but humans feel annoyed and threatened when wild animals appear in inappropriate places. Deer chomp ornamental shrubs, mountain lions stalk subdivisions, and Canadian geese leave their calling cards on golf courses to the chagrin of groundskeepers.

Creating backyard habitats can help solve this problem. By providing food, water, shelter, and places to raise babies, my family can offer a safe haven. Our yard is barely an acre, but we've

made choices to include diverse plantings, evergreens, birdbaths, and an old woodpile.

We humans often overlook the part God's creatures play in our own survival, but we have direct and beneficial relationships with wild things. Bees and other insects like monarch butterflies pollinate the millions of acres of crops we grow in our country. Bats gulp disease-carrying mosquitoes. Birds need seeds to survive, and seed-bearing plants need birds to spread their seed; those seeds grow up into resources we humans use regularly—fuel, lumber, food crops, medicines, and textiles are just a few examples.

Beyond the benefit to creatures, another reason to create a backyard habitat is to provide sanctuary for us humans, too. We meet God in the sanctuary at church, but our family's backyard habitat is another place where we can listen to God, watch him at work in his creation, and find rest from the busyness of modern life.

Where I grew up, in the suburbs of Indianapolis, our backyard bordered a field and a wood. The field had a tiny sunken pond that offered tadpoles in the summer and skating in the winter. The wood stretched clear down to Mrs. Eschenbrenner's house (at least ten backyards, I figured) and out to busy Keystone Avenue. Trails wove through the whole of it, and we followed them as far as we dared. I remember going on spring wildflower walks with my mother—who taught me all about birds and plants in those woods—and finding a tree to climb, book between my

teeth, to read in blissful solitude.

As I grew older, the woods became my sanctuary when I was confused by adolescence, tormented by bashfulness, and aware of a nagging feeling that I was not like other kids my age. (Kids my age didn't usually count a manual Smith-Corona typewriter among their prized possessions.) Slipping away for a walk under the canopy of trees, I felt knitted together again.

My sanctuary was swallowed by sprawl, however, when a new mall and an assisted-living facility went up. I'm sure it never occurred to the developers to leave that space hospitable to wildlife. In a growing city, it takes a special vision to maintain green spaces.

I believe that we have an instinct to seek a green sanctuary, as if we have latent memories of Eden. Creating a green space—even if it's an apartment balcony, an alley, or a front porch—can provide breathing room for the spirit. A backyard habitat is not a pristine lawn—you have to put up with a little untidiness to be hospitable to wildlife. However, living in a habitat can be a joyful thing. We have watched robins feed their young. We've discovered a nest of baby rabbits in our green beans, waited like expectant parents for monarch larvae to hatch into butterflies, and drifted off to sleep to the sound of spring peepers.

I chuckled the other day when I discovered my oldest daughter reading in our maple tree. She too was born an Eden-seeker. □

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