



FEEDER STATION

Landscaped cornfield attracts birds

by Laurel Ann Kaiser

When I was single, I lived in apartments and condominiums, and didn't have the chance to attract birds and other wildlife in my backyard. In fact, after I married my husband, Jim, six years ago, we began looking for townhouses and condos. Life was just too busy to worry about a yard, landscaping and, mowing lawns.

But something deep in the back of our minds told us we wanted a real home with a backyard. So we bought a new garden home in Mundelein built atop a cornfield. Little did we realize that landscaping for birds would soon consume most of our free time from spring until fall. First we planted edge bushes including winterberries, honeysuckle, forsythia, and dogwood. Jim next planted raised beds for azaleas, annuals, perennials, and bulbs, and designed a sunken brick patio with a Japanese maple, and finally a kidney-shaped landscaped area with bird feeding station, bird-bath, junipers, rocks, and twigs. This is a favorite spot for many of the birds that come to feed - House Finches, grackles, robins, Mourning Doves, Blue Jays, sparrows, starlings, cardinals, chickadees, and even Cedar Waxwings. This may sound unremarkable to some, but remember, we are in a new area, with no trees, and our neighbors have mostly planted fences. But we provide what birds need - food, water, and shelter.

On our deck we grow potted fuschias, which the migrating Ruby-

throated Hummingbirds enjoy. On early September mornings I rush to the kitchen window to see the hummers drink the nectar, darting from fuschia to geranium to impatiens. We also hung a window feeder by our kitchen and stocked it with thistle, which attracts goldfinches and House Finches all spring and summer. We enjoy watching the goldfinches dart from the feeder to the nearby Japanese maple in their unique undulating pattern.

Cardinal courtship feeding is another frequent occurrence at our modest bird sanctuary, especially after we tried safflower hearts, which the bright red birds love. At our raised beds, sunflower seeds are the fare, and the birds help our plantings by providing us with beautiful sunflowers that grow from their sloppy eating behavior.

Black-capped Chickadees have even nested in our next door neighbor's wooden fence post! We like to think the chickadees were first attracted to our array of feeder goodies and then scouted out a nesting spot close to the local eatery.

The summer of 1995, a female Song Sparrow laid four oval brown-spotted eggs in a neatly constructed nest in our 3-foot tall globe arbor vitae adjacent to the Japanese maple. She laid one egg per day beginning in early July completing the clutch at four. While I watered my perennials, she incubated the eggs. The male sometimes sang nearby. Then on July 21, the first of three nestlings was born. The last egg never hatched. I was having a garden party in a few

days so I put a sign near the nest asking my visitors to keep away from the nesting birds. The adult Song Sparrows were nervous when the guests arrived. But the day after the party, I saw a fledgling Song Sparrow sitting atop the arbor vitae and an adult feeding it a juicy black cricket. A few days later, the fledgling Song Sparrows were gone, but the thrill that this species chose our humble, makeshift nature preserve remains.

When fall approaches, our perennial beds attract migrating White-crowned and White-throated Sparrows which search for bugs among the leaves and debris. The winterberries and hedges that surround our backyard provide a safe haven for these birds as they nourish themselves for their long migratory flight.

We stock our feeders year-round. Nothing is more heartening on a blustery wintry day than to look right outside my window, in my modest home in an unremarkable neighborhood and spy a ruby red cardinal amid the grayish-white snow. Spring mornings are so much more delightful with the robin's insistent, clear tones, ringing through my cracked-open window. What could be more fun than to watch a robin and a sparrow furiously ruffling their feathers after a cooling dip in our bird bath? The ebb and flow of seasonal changes are what I like best about living in northern Illinois, and backyard birding heightens this feeling one-hundred fold.

*Feeder Station Illustration
by Denis Kania.*