

## Somersworth Helping Wildlife: More Guidance for National Wildlife Federation Property Certification

I had this conversation with a Somersworth resident, and realized that it might be helpful for everyone:

**Q:** We are interested in the idea of creating a certified wildlife habitat and I just wasn't sure if there was any additional guidance for the process

**A:** Thanks for asking. The [certification form](#) on the Conservation Commission page goes straight to National Wildlife Foundation (NWF) for evaluation. Property owners submit their application to NWF, and then let the Conservation Commission know, so we can add it to our tracking sheet. The city gets points toward community certification for each individual certification. It might be handy for you to mention the Somersworth project directly on the application too.

It's not overly complicated. My wife and I certified our property. It seems to have been on the honor system; nobody came back and quizzed us.

Once you get started, resources start to compound benefits and boost each other.

Our food sources include:

- Flower seed heads that we leave over the winter
- An array of flowering plants that bloom from spring through fall
- A variety of berries that come available at different times through the warmer months, as well as berries that remain over the winter. We have
  - Huckleberry bushes
  - Holly
  - Winterberry
  - Service berry trees – bird favorites
  - Viburnum – the birds go nuts over these – especially catbirds, and another species that escapes me.
  - Dewberries – these are like blackberries, but native. They grow on the ground
  - Dogbane
- Tree seeds
  - Acorns
  - Maple seeds
  - Witch hazel
  - Pine cones
- Insects
- Mushrooms
- Bird seed in winter. Take your feeders down when bears are astir.
- An occasional pumpkin or apple – although I don't want chipmunks anywhere near my car, I will begrudge them the right to eat; they feast on pumpkins.

### Places for Cover:

When we moved in, the hill in front of the driveway was nothing but dark mulch. We planted **low shrubs** primarily for erosion control, but also for wildlife, including frogs, snakes, bees (most bees build solitary nests in the ground, though we did get a yellow jacket nest in one clump of woody flowers).

If I had to do it over, I would have planted different **tree** species, but the smoke bush and the two Japanese willows we planted have served as nests for catbirds, I think, and maybe sparrows. Consider trees' maximum sizes so they don't crowd out stuff around them, including but not limited to other trees, your house, utility lines, the street (the tree ordinance goes over that), and visibility.

We have a small **rock wall**, and our driveway has a wall of boulders they removed when they built the foundation. I've seen chipmunks, squirrels, deer mice, snakes, salamanders, frogs and birds in there.

We have some **exposed roots** that are out of the way of where we walk, and we've left some **stumps** and **snags** (tree trunks). Shrews and chipmunks take up residence there, and porcupines, foxes, raccoons and probably foxes find good food in there. The woodpeckers make large holes in the snags, and other birds move in there. We have a brush pile that consists of twigs and branches that fall in wind storms. Chipmunks, squirrels and house wrens go in there. Thrushes also like it.

Leaves near a rock wall are good cover for salamanders (if it's shady), especially if you keep a ground level birdbath. If you keep your grass at three to four inches and allow some native ground cover to take up residence, the ground feeding birds will be there all day long. The longer grass and diversity of plants means more earthworms, crickets, etc., and it gives the birds and chipmunks cover while they forage. Our yard produces a bumper crop of rocks each winter, in one area in particular. I used to either remove them or mow between them. Then my wife convinced me to let the blueberries grow, and I don't have to mow that area. The blueberries don't grow higher than a foot. A lot of moss moved in, some ferns, etc. I just have to be on **constant lookout for invasives** from elsewhere – bittersweet and burning bush. They will march across your yard and into the woods in a single season if you let them.

We have several fallen logs in the back woods. Perfect for wildlife. My wife went so far as taking people's used Christmas trees a few times. While it is true that it's great for birds, it does give me pause about fire. You still have to be practical. Also to the point about **practicality**, I stay cognizant of the neighbors' preferences. I will pick and choose which seed heads I leave standing, which I clip to the ground, and which I remove altogether. I remove enough leaves for it to look socially acceptable. If I want this trend to catch fire, I don't want to be in the habit of turning people off. If you're going to leave a stump or a snag, it's always possible to do it in a way that doesn't stand out.

### Places to Raise Young:

- Trees
- Sandy soil that doesn't easily grow grass is perfect for mason bees and sweat bees. These bees generally don't sting. Learn the difference between bees and wasps though, so you have a heads-up if wasps move in. Crickets will dig nests under tufts of grass or clover.
- Shrubs

- Bird houses – a downy woodpecker was very fond of the composite trim I put up on the corner of the house outside my office. To entice it to go elsewhere, I built a house out of the scraps of my son's old bunk bed, to downy woodpecker dimensions. Red breasted nuthatches and wrens ended up using it, but that's good too. Bird species have their unique preferences for height from the ground, height between the entrance and the floor, where the door faces with respect to south, how close it is to the perimeter of the yard, versus in the woods, etc. I have one under the deck for the phoebes, since phoebes nested in the deck support beams one year (they haven't used the house), and a couple others in different spots.
- We have little burrows here and there from chipmunks and shrews. They're always under something, so the holes are barely visible.
- Not what I expected, but I've found baby deer mice in my compost barrel twice. No idea how they get in, but I'm sure it stays warm, and there's plenty of food.
- Milkweed – milkweed does flower, and monarch caterpillars eat the leaves, but they also lay their eggs on them. So if you pull the stalks between summer and spring, the eggs go with them. Again, there's a compromise. You can't leave a ton of milkweed stalks and keep all the neighbors happy. Two things you can do are try to figure out which ones are most likely to bear eggs, and selectively knock some of the stalks to the ground and pick them up in late spring. I don't know how much that impacts viability, but experts have suggested it.
- Other pith filled stalks – pollinators of many kinds drill into the stems and deposit their eggs.

#### Water Sources:

If you're not too far from a beaver pond or streams, you're covered there for birds and mammals. We keep a bird bath on the ground (several in drought) and one on a pedestal. We have a heated one for the pedestal in winter. I know that's over the top for most people. We see mammals using the bird baths too. If you put bird baths out, change the water daily, and clean them weekly. Bird baths are easy transfer vectors for disease. During the mid-Atlantic bird die-off, NH Fish and Game recommended cleaning them daily with bleach, which I did. I sprayed diluted bleach on them and scrubbed them in my utility sink. Bleach is bad news outdoors or anywhere, really. Outside of that epidemic, I just use a bit of dish detergent. It took a small chunk of my time in the morning, but it was gratifying to see the birds lining up waiting for me to finish.

#### Sustainable Gardening Practices:

- We have two rain barrels. We have yet to set the second one up, but the first one provides probably 400 gallons of water for plants per season. It would provide a lot more, but we don't go through that much water unless we need the sprinkler, which goes to the faucet.
- When we water, we water close to the ground, so that more soaks into the ground.
- Our front garden is dense enough now to be called a rain garden.
- We live on a hill, so I create terraces and water breaks.
- The application says to use mulch for ground cover and erosion control. I disagree. Plants serve as much better solutions for both, and they add to the biodiversity.
- Use of native plants is tricky. Nobody at the nursery is out there pushing you to buy natives, or necessarily being transparent about how truly native a plant is. That's where the [Tree Ordinance](#) list can help. The UNH Cooperative Extension has a much broader list of native plants. Let the Conversation Commission know if you get stuck. We double as the Tree Board.

- I mentioned removal of invasives. It's becoming more and more time and labor intensive. I spent hours and hours removing hawkweed from our yard this summer. Pretty flowers, but they send out runners and produce a mat that chokes everything else out. Prevention is best.
- I only use slow-release organic fertilizer. I don't use herbicides. We had an infestation on our viburnum for a couple years. I took care of it with a dilute solution of – I can't remember whether it was dish detergent or soap – and water. Boric acid works for ants around the house, etc.
- The compost reduces our trash volume and stuff we might otherwise send through the garbage disposal, but it also produces miracle soil. We use it around root balls when we plant, and I fill holes with it, etc. Where I have done that, the grass has been lush and dark green for years.
- For integrated pest management, nothing makes me happier than seeing dragonflies, phoebes and bats removing mosquitos from my yard. Bat boxes are cool. I tried one unsuccessfully. Keep in mind that small mammals and birds could be pests too, if there weren't larger predators keeping them in check. If you keep a good transition of ground cover to understory to canopy, you will get barred owls, maybe great horned owls, cooper's hawks, sharp shinned hawks, red tailed hawks, foxes, weasels and coyotes. Hopefully no bears, but they are around.

Please let the Conservation Commission know when you've received certification, so we can add you to our points toward certifying the city.

Thanks for your interest. I think this is the biggest and most direct impact we can have on protecting wildlife and ourselves against the impacts of climate change, and of restoring the diversity and resilience that have been lost to habitat fragmentation. It's also sure to help us get reconnected with the complex and amazing world in which we are immersed.

Scott Orzechowski

Chair, Somersworth Conservation Commission

Please visit the Conservation Commission site at  
<https://www.somersworth.com/conservation-commission>  
 for more information on the Somersworth Helping Wildlife community habitat program.