

wildlife in your backyard

a guide
to urban
habitat
development

Ron Spomer

City Life is tough. I have an urban friend who has to sidestep two dozen feeding goldfinches in his driveway every morning before he can motor to work. Some winter days he has to scare off three fox squirrels to get a better view of the pine siskins stuffing themselves on thistle seed outside his patio window. Another poor devil I know has to mow around the prickly pear cactus blossoms, stately yucca flower spikes and violet penstemon flowers just to cut down his bothersome blue grass. Then there's

this other city dude who has frogs and turtles and sunfish in a backyard pond—the same one doves and thrashers and robins bathe in. Hmm. Maybe urban living isn't so bad after all. At least not in backyards that have been designed for wildlife.

A backyard, whether it is four square feet or 40,000 attracts wild critters in direct proportion to the amount of good habitat it grows. The wilder and more diversified the better.

Today tangled lawns and luxuriant backyards do not

necessarily

point an

accusing

branch at

slovenly

homeowners.

Instead they

wave as banners,

proclaiming the
presence of

concerned, active

wildlife enthusiasts

doing their part to help

butterflies, squirrels,

chickadees, catbirds, garter

snakes, cottontails, cardinals

and even deer. And loving every

minute of it. The biggest status symbol

on the block is no longer the swimming pool.

It's the wildlife watering pool, complete with

turtles, frogs, fish and salamanders. It's the thicket

of berry bushes ripe with fruit and hungry birds.

Keeping up with the Joneses now means planting

buffalo grass and walnuts and sunflowers. Why

move to the country when you can bring the

country to you?

Of course, these days, bringing the country into the backyard is as important down on the farm as it is over in the city. Modern agribusiness often leaves farmsteads isolated in a sea of wheat or corn, hardly prime living space for wildlife. But a good backyard habitat can provide housing for dozens of species that can forage in the adjoining fields.

Wildlife is no longer something to take for granted. It's become extraordinary in most of man's settings. And the extraordinary in our society becomes popular. Here's how to get yours.



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a voluntary contribution program funded by Kansas taxpayers.

Photo by Gene Brehm

planting for wildlife

The most responsible and dependable way for anyone to take care of his backyard wildlife is by creating a natural system that will enable the critters to take care of themselves. It's not unlike the old proverb "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach him how to fish and you feed him for life."

Feed a bird in your backyard and you'll help keep it alive. Plant seed- and fruit-bearing shrubs, vines, annuals and trees and you'll not only keep a bird alive, you'll help produce hundreds more. They'll find places in your yard to nest, feed, roost and escape predators. They'll glean insects from your lawn, trees and garden, all the while entertaining you with their antics, color and song. Beyond your initial landscaping, about all you'll have to do is sit back and enjoy the show, year after year. And all those trees and bushes will increase the value of your property.

Variety, density and "edge" are three things you need to consider when planning your backyard habitat. The more varieties of plants you include in your yard, the greater variety of animals you'll attract. Tall, mature trees will be home to northern orioles, eastern and western kingbirds, scarlet tanagers, red-eyed vireos, squirrels, screech owls and many other arboreal (tree-dwelling) animals. Shrubs and shorter trees will provide nesting sites for robins, cardinals, chickadees, grosbeaks and other colorful songbirds. Bushes and vines will appeal to house wrens, song sparrows, towhees, catbirds and yellow warblers. Rock walls or rubble piles will house chipmunks, lizards and rodent-eating snakes. Tall grasses will serve as nurseries for cottontails and shelter for quail.

Food variety is just as important as shelter variety. A good mix of vegetation will provide insects for all kinds of birds. A flower garden can entice butterflies and hummingbirds to visit. Squirrels, jays and other nut eaters will dine in oaks, hickories, etc. Purple finches relish the winged seeds of maples. Soft fruits like cherries, blackberries and mulberries sell like penny candy to summering birds.

Dense cover is essential when winter winds howl across your doorstep. The deciduous shrubs that looked so impenetrable last June are an awfully cold space in January, but the coniferous plants are as cozy as ever. A thicket of them makes a snug roost for everything from cardinals to whitetail deer. In fact, cedars may be the perfect wildlife trees for Kansas. Dozens of bird species nest in them,

The sunflower tribe produces some of the finest all-round wildlife food available. Wild or domestic, these annuals bear many large seeds which are rich in oils, fats, and protein, and most are drought resistant, thriving in the typical Kansas climate with little care. (Butterfly by Ron Spomer, goldfinch by Gene Brehm.)



dozens more hide in them, and most of these eat the nutritious blue berries. A cluster of cedars in the corner of the yard is a good investment.

For the best view of your wildlife habitat, arrange specimens with the tallest in the back—perhaps at the edge of your property—descending to the shortest in front. Mix and space them to create the "edge effect" that attracts the greatest number of animals possible. If you have clumps or "islands" of dense shrubbery surrounded by open lawn or grass, brush-loving species such as brown thrashers will venture into the open to sunbathe or dustbathe. The open-ground species such as robins will dart into the nearby thickets for protection. You can also create edge by alternating strips of bushes with strips of native grass or open lawn. Plant flowers along the inside edge of your bushes nearest the house to attract butterflies and hummingbirds. Leave a block of corn, sunflowers or



other grain standing as “ready-to-eat animal snacks.”

If your yard already has a few mature trees, design additional plantings around them. Shrubs grow quickly and provide excellent summer habitat. Don't trim the lower branches, for these are what ground nesting birds, mammals and reptiles need for protection. If your older trees have dead or damaged branches, don't automatically remove them. If they don't threaten to fall on your garage or head, allow them to weather naturally to provide homes for cavity nesting species from chickadees to raccoons. A dead tree is worth as much to wildlife as a live one. If it becomes necessary to remove a dead tree, consider leaving a stump. Anything from one to twenty feet tall will provide food and housing for a surprising number of animals, especially birds.

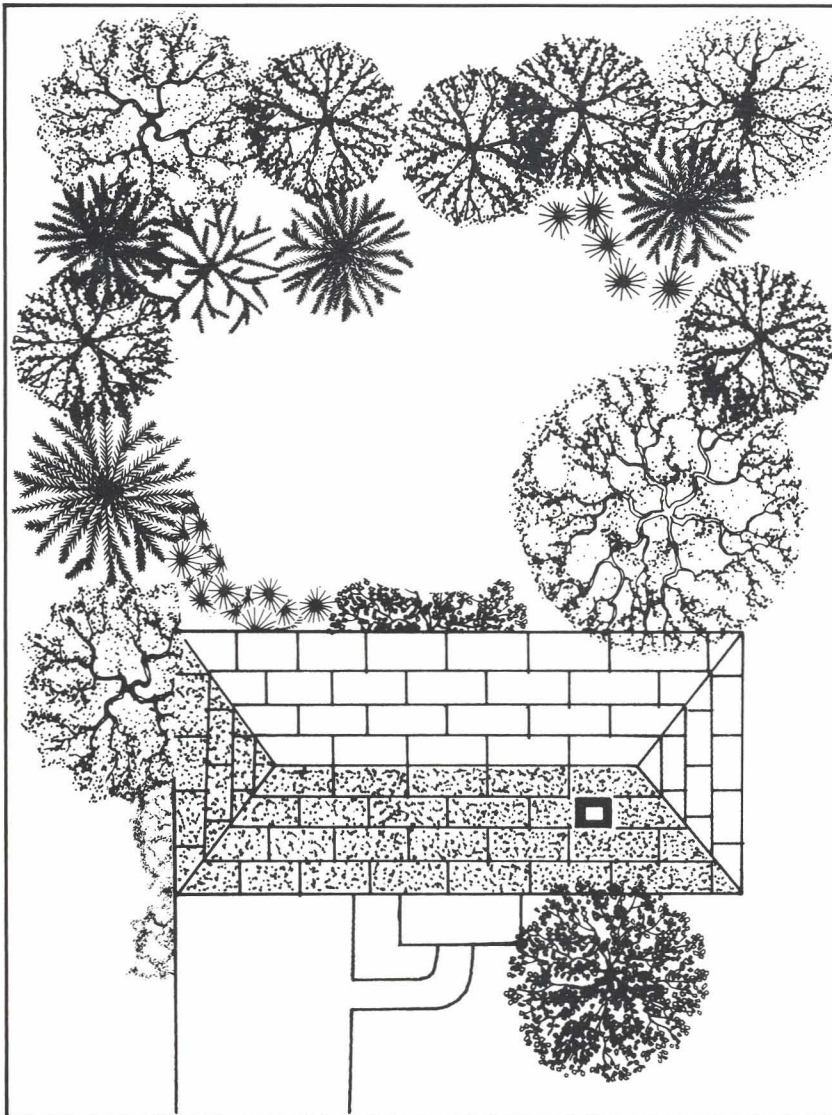
Grass is seldom thought of as good wildlife cover,

and the manicured, fertilized and heavily-watered bluegrass lawns most Americans pay for and struggle to maintain aren't. But native grasses can provide food, cover and nest sites for everything from kangaroo rats to buffalo (don't expect a bison to graze past your kitchen window). A strip of little bluestem, big bluestem, Indian grass or switchgrass makes a colorful border or centerpiece. You might like them so much you'll dedicate a chunk of your back lawn to prairie restoration, complete with wildflowers. To maintain shortgrass lawn with a minimum of labor and expensive materials, plant buffalo grass. It is drought tolerant, naturally short (you only need mow it once or twice a year) and hardy without infusions of fertilizer.



Consider all of these points—variety, density (cover), edge—while planning your backyard habitat. The accompanying lists will help you assess the values of various plants.

planting for wildlife



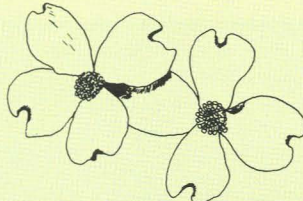
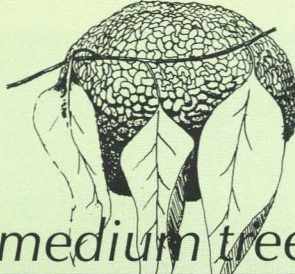
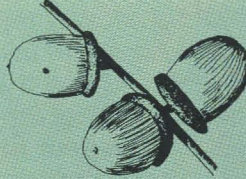
Variety, the spice of life: Wildlife needs food, water, refuge from weather and predators, and a place to breed. Simple enough. Until you try to provide all these elements to a changing array of wildlife through four seasons. The combinations are almost endless, and the best way to cover most possibilities is to build variety into the habitat you plant. Variety in species—many different kinds of plants offer a continuous, dependable food supply which is not likely to be devastated by disease. Variety in height—many bird species parcel out habitat among themselves according to the height each prefers; the more levels you offer, the more species you're likely to see. Variety in layout—even in fairly small acreages, the amount of edge between major kinds of vegetation is important. Points and islands of woody vegetation mixed with grass and forbs create more edge and are more attractive to wildlife than simple blocks.



Illustrations adapted from the National Wildlife Federation's book *Gardening with Wildlife*.

 <p><i>domestics</i></p>	 <p><i>vines</i></p>
<p>alfalfa sweetclovers domestic sunflower corn milo</p>	<p>Proso millet salvia daisies columbine yarrow</p>
<p>bittersweet Virginia creeper any wild grape trumpet vine</p>	



	 <p><i>forbs and native grasses</i></p>	 <p><i>shrubs</i></p>	 <p><i>medium trees</i></p>	 <p><i>large trees</i></p>
	<p>Indian grass big bluestem little bluestem switchgrass buffalo grass butterfly milkweed other milkweeds all wild sunflowers purple coneflower</p> <p>wild indigo compassplant goldenrods larkspur penstemons gayfeathers Illinois bunfleflower</p>	<p>highbush cranberry gooseberry golden currant cotoneaster holly firethorn wahoo sumac wild rose</p> <p>hazelnut dogwoods honeysuckle autumn olive elderberry sand plum blackberry raspberry</p>	<p>mulberry crab apple catalpa red haw hawthorn osage orange Russian olive black cherry choke cherry</p> <p>pawpaw persimmon red bud red cedar Scotch pine Norway pine</p>	<p>white oak burr oak northern red oak pin oak hackberry ash black walnut pecan butternut</p> <p>hickories sugar maple silver maple honey locust basswood sycamore cottonwood ponderosa pine</p>



feeding through the winter

The fastest way to attract wild critters to your backyard is to invite them to dinner. Put out some suet and a few seeds and the soup line will begin forming.

Birds will be your first customers simply because of their abundance and mobility. It's surprising how quickly they'll fly in to a new food supply. If you live near good habitat such as woods or brushy fields, you could lure a few diners the first day you spread the table. Older communities with large shade trees harbor an impressive quantity of songbirds. New housing developments, where the only trees are dead ones holding up utility lines, may not attract birds for years unless there is some type of permanent, brushy cover nearby.

The numbers and kinds of mammals you entertain at your backdoor smorgasbord will depend even more on the proximity of good habitat. If you own any mature trees, you might soon find a squirrel rummaging through your bird feeder. Cottontails will set up housekeeping in weeds, bushes or even a heap of debris. At night they'll hop over to sample the table scraps spilled by the birds. If your property abuts a woods or other extensive natural area, you can expect visits from hungry raccoons, opossums, skunks and even deer.

You can increase your odds of successfully wooing a particular species by offering its favorite meal, and the way you offer it can also affect your success. For example, birds that feed on the ground—sparrows, towhees, mourning doves, etc.—won't get too excited about picking sunflowers from a plastic cylinder hanging from a branch. They'd rather scratch and pick through the soil and duff. If you want them around, scatter seed on a bare spot in your lawn. Once they begin foraging regularly, you can build a platform with raised edges to hold the seed. Set this on a brick or short post a few inches off the ground. The birds will soon find it, and your seed will stay out of the mud. Eventually you can erect a high roof over the platform to further protect the feed.

Most birds that pick seeds and insects from trees can be enticed to the ground for a good meal, but they prefer their kitchen up in the air. Swinging feeders are fine for the more energetic members of these groups, but most species prefer a stable plate. A big, automatic hopper feeder—one that stores several gallons of seed and dispenses it as needed—should be mounted on a post or sturdy branch. It will become the focal point of your feeding operations.

Bird feeders don't have to be complicated to be effective. Many of the sparrows and finches prefer their food on the ground. Insect-eaters like the nuthatches and woodpeckers flock to a simple grapefruit bag filled with beef suet (opposite). Cardinal and red-breasted nuthatch by Ron Spomer.



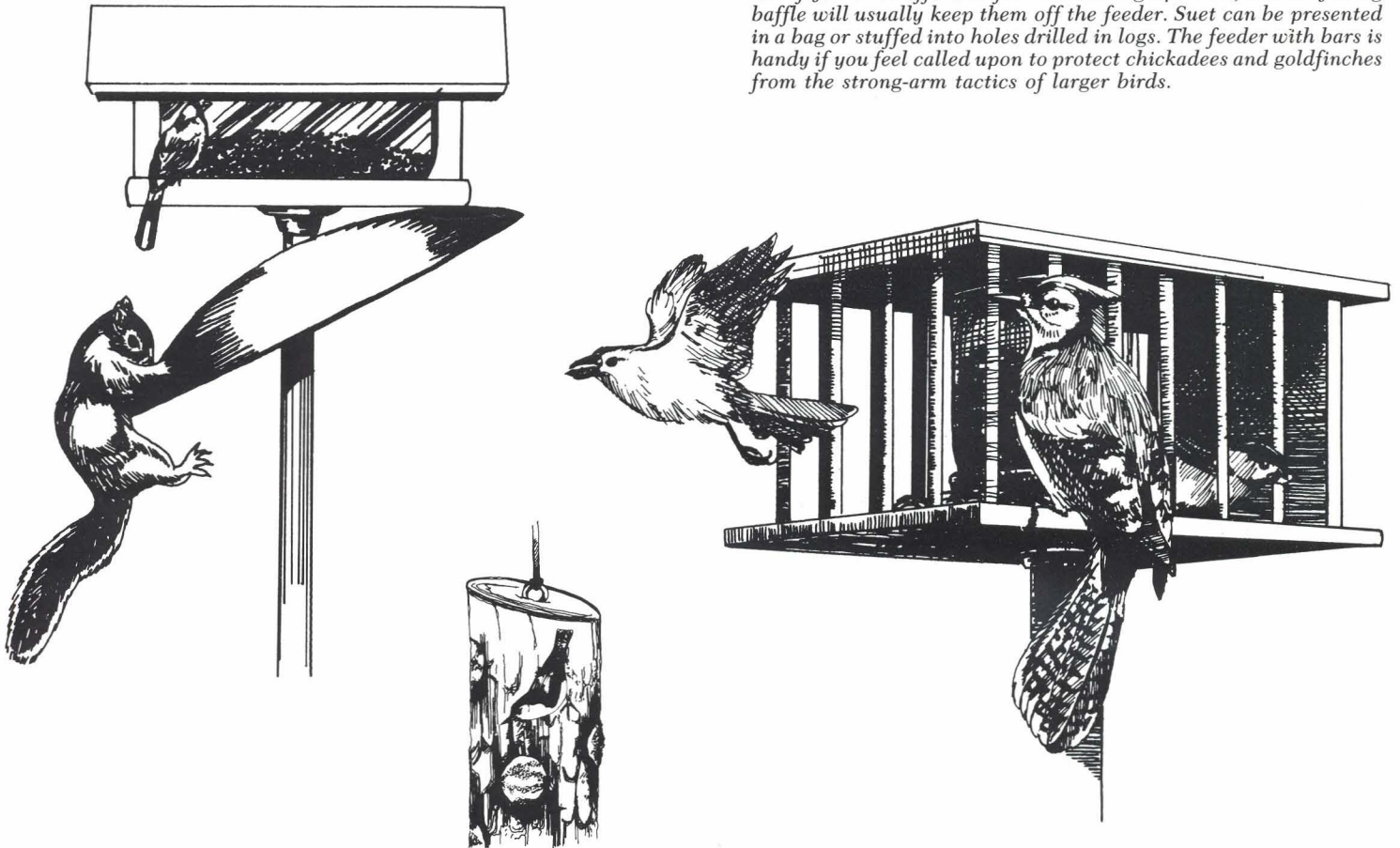
Squirrels won't waste any time in discovering—and eating—your seed supply. If you can't afford to buy their daily bread, "squirrel-proof" your feeder by locating it at least ten feet from any tree or other perch and almost that high off the ground. (Squirrels are Olympic class long and high jumpers.) A five-foot mounting pole may be tall enough if you place a squirrel baffle around it. Make a metal disc (or use a garbage can lid) and cut a hole in its center larger than the diameter of the mounting pole. Place this over the pole a few inches beneath the feeder so that it balances loosely on a clamp or other stop. Now when The Great Squirrely goes into his acrobatic routine and leaps onto the baffle, it will tilt and dump him off. Appease the poor character's hunger and pride by offering him ear corn speared onto a long nail driven into a post or tree trunk.

The best and one of the cheaper bird seeds is sunflower seed, especially the small oil-seed type commonly grown by grain farmers. Most common backyard birds relish these packets of protein. As an added bonus, starlings almost never take them, and house sparrows (European weaver finches) aren't crazy about them either. Native sparrows and finches really like millet, another inexpensive grain. Buy it and sunflower in bulk (fifty pounds or more)



feeding through the winter

Feeders are almost as varied as the feathered creatures to which they cater. Large-capacity feeders that meter out seed as it's needed are more than convenient; they also insure a continuous food supply, an absolute requirement if you're feeding during the winter. If you can't afford to feed marauding squirrels, a loosely hung baffle will usually keep them off the feeder. Suet can be presented in a bag or stuffed into holes drilled in logs. The feeder with bars is handy if you feel called upon to protect chickadees and goldfinches from the strong-arm tactics of larger birds.



at grain elevators. Don't bother with most of the commercial "wild bird seed mixes" available from supermarkets and hardware stores. These usually contain a high percentage of oats and other unpalatable seeds.

Suet (animal fat) rounds out a feeding operation by providing stick-to-the-ribs-food for numerous insectivorous species. You can render (melt down) the fat or provide it raw. Get beef suet free or for a few cents per pound from your local meat cutter. Hang it in mesh bags, pour it into holes bored into a log or place it in a wood cage.

If you want to get exotic, you can dish out raisins, apples, bananas and other fruit chunks. In winter they may fill the belly of a robin, bluebird or other straggler. In summer they aren't necessary for any species' welfare, but they can lure fruiteaters out of the tree tops for a closer view.

The most unusual bird feeder doesn't hold seeds, fruit or suet—just sugar water. And it attracts hummingbirds. Hummingbirds get no real benefits from man-made feeders, but man sure does. What a fascinating bird! Enjoy it at your feeder, but also plant flowers such as trumpet vine nearby.

Hummers take insects under natural conditions, and a steady diet of sugar water is not healthy. In fact, you should use a special commercial hummingbird mix or diluted honey in your feeder, not refined sugar. And take the feeder down as the season progresses. Hummingbirds have been known to hang around a full feeder until cold weather moved in and killed them.

Bird feeding is not necessary for birds. They've been surviving the winter months for thousands of years without man's help. Still, there's no real harm

	● best ○ good	sun flowers	Proso millet	cracked corn	thistle	suet
white-crowned sparrow	●	●	○			
song sparrow	○	●	○			
tree sparrow	○	●	●		○	
Harris' sparrow	●	○	●			
cardinal	●	○	○			
purple finch	●	○	○	○		
house finch	●	○	○	○		
dark-eyed junco	●	○	○	○	○	
goldfinch	●	○	●	●		
pine siskin	●	○		●		
black-capped chickadee	●				●	
tufted titmouse	●				●	
red-breasted nuthatch	●				●	
white-breasted nuthatch	●		○		●	
blue jay	●		○		○	
red-bellied woodpecker	●		●		●	
hairy woodpecker	○				●	
downy woodpecker	○				●	
common flicker			○		●	



Ron Spomer

in providing them with healthy, untainted food. During an occasional blizzard or ice storm, you could save the neighborhood birds from starving. Just don't turn their artificial dining hall into a death trap by letting cats and other predators take advantage of it. Place the feeders near cover but not so close that predators can lie in ambush. Keep the feeding area clean of droppings, which could spread disease. Once you begin winter feeding,

don't stop. Birds will become dependent on you. Without their daily "fix," they could starve. If you leave for several days, have a friend refill any empty trays.

Besides the esthetic enjoyment, there's another good reason to encourage birds to live in your yard. They'll glean insects from your trees, lawn and garden, keeping a more natural balance without resorting to dangerous chemical sprays.

a place to nest

For man, home is where the heart is, but for many animals, home is where the cavity is. Holes and hollows in trees are essential for the survival of wood ducks, kestrels, bluebirds, flying squirrels and dozens more species. Traditionally, man has jeopardized cavity nesters by felling dead branches and trunks, the very materials needed for good hollows. Fortunately, concerned persons can replace many of these destroyed wildlife homes by building and erecting artificial tree cavities—more commonly called bird houses or boxes.

A bird box should imitate a tree cavity as much as possible. Use heavy, rough wood for insulation and a rustic look. If you can get sawmill waste with the bark still on, so much the better. Cypress, cedar or redwood will last the longest outdoors, but heavy pine is cheaper. Protect it with a varnish or tung oil finish on exterior surfaces only. Don't build boxes out of metal or plastic. They can overheat and kill nestlings.

The size of the entrance hole and its distance above the floor are important in keeping predators out. For instance, starlings will reach into shallow bluebird boxes and peck the young or adults to death. Follow the dimensions given in the accompanying chart. Don't put dowel rods or other

perches beneath the entrance hole. Cavity nesting birds don't need them, but pests such as house sparrow use them as harassment platforms.

Cut the roof larger than the floor so it overhangs and slant it forward so it sheds rain. Hinge the roof, floor or one side so you can remove parasite-riddled old nests immediately after a brood has fledged.

Mount the boxes on posts or metal poles if predation is a problem. Some snakes will crawl into nests and eat the eggs or young. Raccoons, opossums and house cats can also be a problem. Face the entrance holes away from prevailing winds and toward some type of brush or branch that fledglings can fly to. Place wood duck boxes near or over water. Put barn owl boxes in large trees or high on the outer walls of buildings and silos. Barn owl nests are critically needed near farms. These unusual birds are famous for their rat catching talents.

The only nesting material you should put in the boxes is a soft layer of sawdust for woodpeckers, owls and kestrels. All other birds will haul in their own bedding.

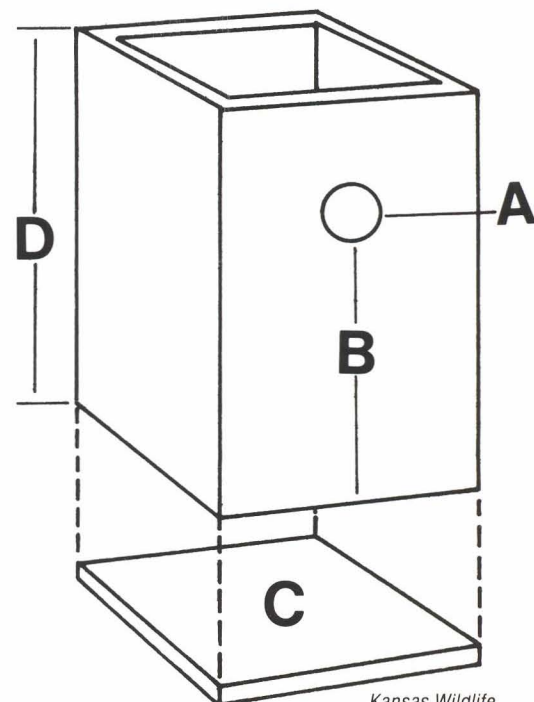
A simple shelf mounted under building eaves may encourage barn swallows, phoebes or robins to nest.

Mammal houses are easy to build. For

Most birds are comfortable with very simple shelter as long as the dimensions of their home are appropriate. The table below summarizes the preferred nest box sizes for many common backyard species. The dimensions refer to the generalized nest box to the right of the table. One extremely beneficial summer bird, the purple martin, would rather live in an apartment than in a single dwelling. The plans shown at far right can be used to build any number of stories that suits your fancy.

Dimensions for Tailoring Nest Boxes

BIRDS USING SINGLE ENTRANCE BOXES	Entrance		Dimensions		Location Height Feet
	A Diameter Inches	B Above Floor Inches	C Floor Inches	D Sides Inches	
Barn owl	6	4	10 x 18	15 to 18	12 to 18
Bewick's wren	1 to 1-1/4	1 to 6	4 x 4	6 to 8	6 to 10
Bluebird	1-1/2	6	5 x 5	8	5 to 10
Carolina wren	1-1/2	1 to 6	4 x 4	6 to 8	6 to 10
Chickadees	1-1/8	6 to 8	4 x 4	8 to 10	6 to 15
Crested flycatcher	2	6 to 8	6 x 6	8 to 10	8 to 20
Downy woodpecker	1-1/4	6 to 8*	4 x 4	8 to 10	6 to 20
Flickers	2-1/2	14 to 16	7 x 7	16 to 18	6 to 20
Hairy woodpecker	1-1/8	9 to 12	6 x 6	12 to 15	12 to 20
House wren	7/8	1 to 6	4 x 4	6 to 8	6 to 10
Nuthatches	1-1/4	6 to 8	4 x 4	8 to 10	12 to 20
Redheaded woodpecker	2	9 to 12	6 x 6	12 to 15	12 to 20
Screech owl	3	9 to 12	8 x 8	12 to 15	10 to 20
Sparrow hawk	3	9 to 12	8 x 8	12 to 15	10 to 30
Titmouse	1-1/4	6 to 8	4 x 4	8 to 10	6 to 15
Tree swallow	1-1/2	1 to 5	5 x 5	6	10 to 15



Kansas Wildlife

chipmunks, just pile rocks or rubble in an odd corner, being careful to leave many cavities. You can also cover small tiles, boxes or cans with rocks.

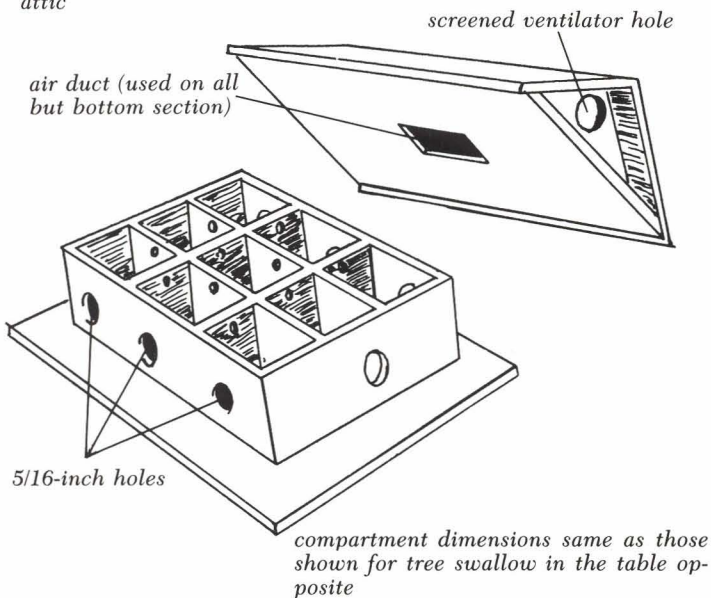
Tree squirrels readily accept man-made boxes. In fact, they often commandeer wood duck boxes. A squirrel box should be twenty inches deep, ten inches front to back and six inches side to side. Cut an entrance in a top corner two and a half inches square, and secure the box in a mature tree twenty feet off the ground.

Raccoons will move into a similarly designed box. Increase all dimensions by six inches and make the entrance four inches square. Before you encourage any to live with you, remember that raccoons can wreak havoc among birds, garbage and garden crops.

Few folks think of toads as backyard wildlife, but they are. And valuable ones at that, considering how many harmful insects they eat. They spend days in moist, underground "caves." You can build these at the edges of your lawn and garden by burying plastic margarine tubs a few inches underground. Cut one side away for an entrance leading to a short runway to the surface.

Insect-eating reptiles such as ribbon snakes, garter snakes and fence lizards will room in rock heaps, rooting stumps, brush piles and stone fences.

additional sections can be added as colony grows; bottomless center compartments form an air duct to the ventilated attic



a place to drink

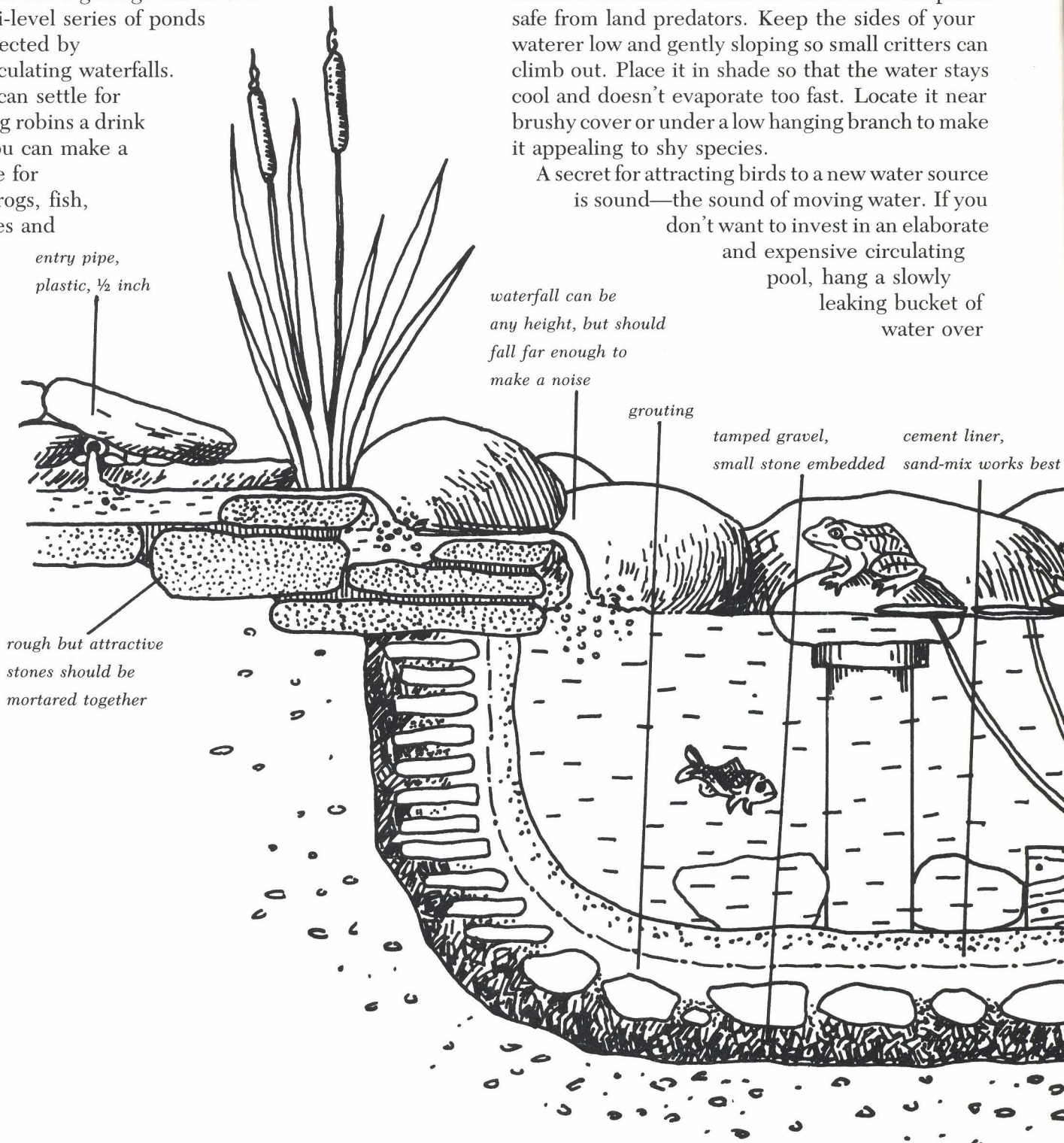
A cool drink of water can do wonders for a backyard wildlife refuge. Research has shown that virtually every type of terrestrial habitat becomes more attractive to wildlife when it has a steady water supply.

Your private reservoir can be anything from an upside-down garbage can lid to a multi-level series of ponds connected by recirculating waterfalls. You can settle for giving robins a drink or you can make a home for bullfrogs, fish, turtles and

even wild ducks.

A few guidelines will help you make your "waterhole" attractive and safe. First, make it shallow (one inch deep or less) so small birds can stand in it and bathe. If you build a large pool, make one end of it shallow enough for this purpose. Place a rock in it to create an island on which birds can perch safe from land predators. Keep the sides of your waterer low and gently sloping so small critters can climb out. Place it in shade so that the water stays cool and doesn't evaporate too fast. Locate it near brushy cover or under a low hanging branch to make it appealing to shy species.

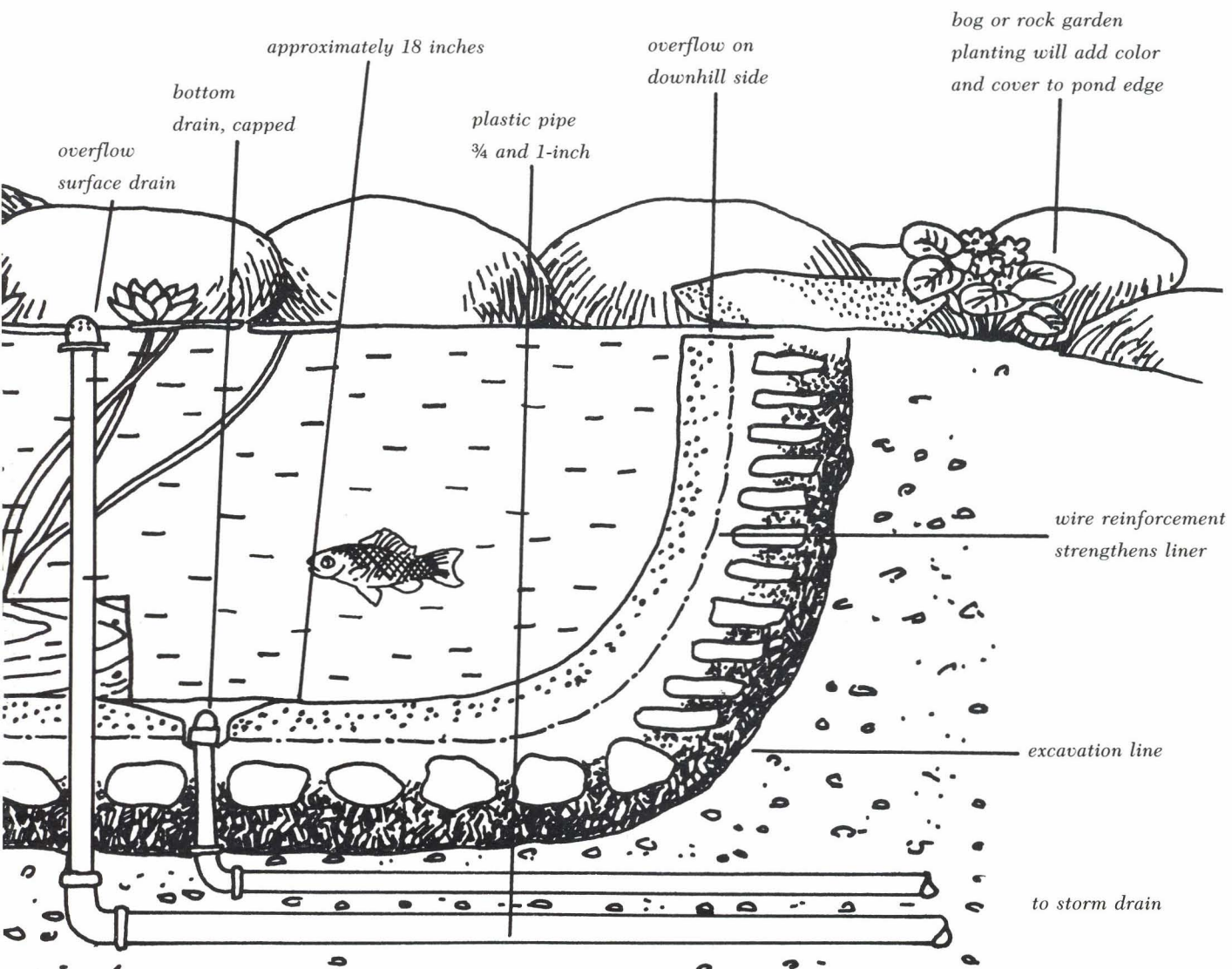
A secret for attracting birds to a new water source is sound—the sound of moving water. If you don't want to invest in an elaborate and expensive circulating pool, hang a slowly leaking bucket of water over



your bird bath or suspend the end of a water hose over it and let it drip, drip, drip. On a hot summer day, that sound draws songbirds like ice cream draws kids. A foot-deep pool or series of pools highlighted with a few lilies, arrowheads, cattails, and other water plants can be a landscaping centerpiece as well as a wildlife haven. The more vegetation cover and diversity near the pool, the more valuable it will be. Insects will live in the vegetation and provide food for frogs, salamanders, birds and even bats at night.

Hardware stores and bird feeding supply shops sell circulating pumps to keep the water fresh. You'll have to import a few fish and amphibians from a nearby stream or pond. Return them to their natural habitat before winter sets in and freezes them. You can keep a portion of your pool open in winter with a livestock trough warmer. You'll be surprised at how many birds take brisk winter baths.

Illustration from National Wildlife Federation's book Gardening with Wildlife.



problem solving

Ah, the pleasures of wild neighbors. The magic of a hummingbird hovering over your patio flowers. The soothing song of the cardinal in your hedge. The comic waddle of a skunk running under your porch. The 2:00 a.m. alarm of a raccoon clanging through your garbage cans. The percussion

of a territorial woodpecker drumming on your shingles. . . . Wait a minute. What's all this smell and noise? Wasn't this wildlife habitat supposed to bring a never-ending stream of esthetic charm?

There's plenty of charm, but living near wild



Ron Spomer

Normally skunks eat insects, rodents, and wild fruits, but in the garden they can put quite a dent in the tomatoes and other crops. Under a porch or foundation, they can lower the real estate value of an entire neighborhood. If you suspect one of these malodorous weasels needs to be nudged out of your backyard, fight fire with fire and offend them with mothballs. Slip a box of the naphthalene into the skunks den. Put some around plants you wish to protect. If that fails, call your community animal damage control officer or local game protector. Never approach a skunk or other mammal that is acting belligerent or otherwise unusual—it might have rabies. Report the animal's behavior to health officials or local police.



Ron Spomer

When vegetables start disappearing from the garden, the common cottontail often gets the blame. After all, Bugs Bunny has been stealing carrots for years. Often cottontails are the culprits, but sometimes they play scapegoat for ground squirrels, wood rats, crows, and even worms. Check the site of damage carefully for tracks and droppings before passing judgment. If you want a few rabbits around but not in your vegetables, plant lure crops of clover, alfalfa, and dandelions in a far corner of your yard. Keep brush far from the garden. Clippings of human hair spread around plants reportedly ward off bunnies. Some innovative green thumbers swear by lion or bobcat urine obtained from zoos or trapper supply houses. A tight, three-foot fence buried a foot deep should keep the varmints out.

animals has its drawbacks, too. Nearly everyone enjoys having a robin nest in his yard, but few people would put up with the din and stench of a heron rookery. The level of human tolerance an animal inspires is no measure of its intrinsic worth. Critters are neither good nor bad; they simply do

what they do as part of the natural system, trying to survive and perpetuate their species. The moral is to be sure you have a problem before you try to solve it. If you take the time to find out a little about your new wildlife neighbors, you'll find that they generally do you more good than harm.

When protected in suburban settings, raccoons quickly learn to exploit the manmade environment, denning in garages, dog houses, and chimneys. They learn to open locks and gates, manhandle garbage cans and steal cat food off the back steps. Sometimes they even steal the cat. If you don't want coons around, don't encourage them by providing den sites or food supplies. They'll find your garden, especially the sweet corn, without any help. You can try keeping them out with a dog leashed near the vegetables, a radio blaring in the corn stalks, or an electric fence strung about six inches off the ground. If they persist, call those animal control people again. A coon is like a plant. When it's in the wrong place, it's a weed.



Bruce Kintner

Most birds are good citizens, but two European immigrants have earned a bad reputation—the English house sparrow (really a finch) and the starling. Both birds out-compete many beneficial native birds for food and housing. Frustrated bird lovers have done everything from poisoning to electrocuting them. More practical defense measures include removing their messy nests daily, covering crevices and eaves around buildings with screens, and feeding the right seeds. Starlings rarely take sunflowers or millet. They do like suet and various table scraps. Sparrows love most seeds except sunflowers. Starlings won't nest in boxes with shiny walls, so you might consider placing a sheet of tin or aluminum foil on the back wall of your martin houses. Several live traps have been designed to catch sparrows and starlings.



Ron Spomer

weeds in the courts

A suburban lot edged with oaks and dogwood and softened with a little native prairie is something of a statement these days, a commitment to a less regimented lifestyle and a blow against Toro lawn mowers. The ranks of backyard wildlife activists are swelling slowly, but, as with any transition in our way of thinking, there are people who would rather stay with the old ways. In far too many cases, these people have some backing from state statutes and local ordinances.

The face-off between the growers and the mowers first surfaced in Wisconsin in the early Seventies. Lorrie Otto of suburban Milwaukee decided to let her yard do what it wanted to do—produce wildlife habitat. Maintenance workers with the municipality in which Mrs. Otto lived watched the yard grow up for some time before their innate sense of neatness prodded them to take action. Backed by a local ordinance against “weeds” on private property, the workers mowed Mrs. Otto’s lawn without her consent. She immediately threatened to sue the city for invasion of privacy unless they could prove that the yard had contained noxious weeds. When they couldn’t, the case was settled out of court and Mrs. Otto “bought a landscape painting with the settlement.”

Similar legal challenges have sprung up all over the country in the decade since Mrs. Otto’s successful action. Since an overwhelming number of city

governments have adopted anti-weed ordinances, a scattering of amateur wildlife managers have been forced to defend their actions in meetings with officials and in court. Kansas is going through such a case this year. The city of Lawrence mowed a yard belonging to Paul Lanz because the vegetation was more than twelve inches high. According to the Lawrence ordinance, twelve inches is the magic boundary between lawn plants and weeds. Lawrence has other weed definitions as well. Brush or woody vines may be considered weeds. Native grass or other plants which may constitute a fire hazard also qualify as do plants which may shelter rats or other vermin. If Lawrence finds one of its citizens harboring such plants, the city may require that the lawn be mowed. If it is not mowed, the city may finally do the mowing itself, then charge the owner for the cost of the job.

In the first round of the Lanz vs. the city of Lawrence case, the district court ruled in favor of the city. Lanz appealed to the state Supreme Court where the district court’s decision was overturned and the case sent back to the district for further deliberation. Before the case is closed, we may see learned members of the state judiciary attempting to clarify the concept of a “weed.” *That* ought to be interesting.

Wisconsin has responded to repeated challenges of local weed ordinances by passing

state statutes that grant a homeowner broad discretion in his landscaping decisions. Until similar action is taken in Kansas, there are a few things you can do to reduce the chances of a legal challenge to your habitat efforts.

The first is to avoid those plants classified as official noxious weeds by the state. Right now, those are musk thistle, Canada thistle, kudzu, field bindweed, Russian knapweed, hoary cress, quackgrass, leafy spurge, bur ragweed, pignut, and johnsongrass. These introduced species are easy to recognize; if you have any difficulties, your extension agent ought to be able to help you.

For most amateur landscapers with a few patches of native flowers and a shrub or two, the question of weed control will never arise. For those few activists who want to turn their yards completely over to Mother Nature, a few additional precautions might be in order. Plan your habitat development. Map your yard, research the values of the plants you intend to establish. If there is any sign of design and organization in your effort, you are quite likely to prevail in any formal or informal challenges to your sanctuary. And, most important, tell your neighbors what you’re up to. Sell them on the value of wildlife habitat, both in terms of enjoyment and enhanced real estate values. Who knows? You may start a movement.