Birds for Natural Insect Control

 Often we enjoy seeing birds frequent our trees and shrubs and listen to their many songs. However too often we fail to recognize the importance of some bird species in their role as insect predators. If ever you had the chance to watch house wren parents feeding their brood you would wonder how they can possibly find so many insects. From dawn until evening the bird parents are constantly going to and from the nest bringing in insects to feed their young. I really think most gardeners could improve their insect control by using the help of house wrens. Place the wren birdhouses in mid-April. The entrance hole should have a diameter of 1 inch, if larger English sparrows can enter. During the spring and summer there is often a shortage of adequate housing sites, so by providing birdhouses we can encourage birds to frequent our gardens.

 During the winter months non-migrating birds that are insect feeders during the growing season switch their diets to seeds and suet. Bird metabolism is very high, so during the winter if birds cannot find a constant source of food they often perish. Providing a daily source of seeds and suet can ensure that the birds survive the winter months.

 Squirrels, raccoons, and opossums are often attracted to bird feeders. During the day if it were not the squirrels tearing the feeder apart, raccoons would destroy it at night. So the problem is how to keep such animals from getting to the feeders. One method is to attach the bird feeders to an upright 4.5-inch (outside diameter) or larger PVC pipe. It is very simple to drill holes near the top end of the pipe (holes should be no closer than 2 inches from the pipe end so a PVC plug can be inserted into the pipe end) and then use screws and nuts to attach shelf bracts (horizontal length 8 inches or more) on which to hang the feeders. The bottom of any feeder should be at least 5 ft. 10 inches from the ground. The pipe comes in 10 ft. lengths so it is best to saw off about 2 ft. from the bottom. Use a sledgehammer and drive a 6 ft. long steel fence post into the ground (use a level) until secure and then on a stepladder place the PVC pipe over the fence post, which serves as a support. The animals cannot get their claws into the pipe and the pipe diameter is large enough that they cannot wrap their legs around the pipe to climb it. Since using this method I have had no problems with animals destroying my bird feeders. Of course the feeders need to be far enough away from trees or buildings so that animals cannot jump onto the feeders.

 To give the PVC pipe and shelf bracts a more professional look, I would suggest that you paint them with white latex paint. I made the mistake of painting the pole brown, but soon afterwards the animals scratched off all the paint from the bottom of the pole. If you use white paint there will not be much contrast.

 It is extremely important to close the top end of the pipe so no bird can enter it. I was greatly saddened to find a screech owl skeleton inside the bottom end of one of my first PVC feeders, which did not have the top sealed. A 3.5 inch PVC plug can be purchased that fits into the top end or use some hardware cloth to completely seal the top end.

 Ants are often attracted to hummingbird feeders because of the presence of sugar. So purchase what is called an ant moat. It is a plastic container that is filled with water that has a hook on the bottom from which any feeder containing sugar or jelly can be suspended. Ants will not walk across the water and thus prevented from getting to the sugar water or jelly.

 By feeding birds in the winter months and providing birdhouses in the spring, they will repay you in kind by eating enormous numbers of insects during the growing season ensuring your property with natural insect control.

James E. Appleby Ph.D., Entomologist

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

WILL TV, 300 N. Goodwin Ave., Urbana, IL 61801

217-333-7300

jappleby@illinois.edu

rev. 10/2016