

Brush Piles and Wildlife

April 4, 2008

To attract wildlife on the wing, leave that brush pile where it lies.

Sirens of spring call us out of our houses and, for some of us, onto our tractors fitted with bulldozer blade scrapers, tree grubbers, drum cutters, hydro-axes with mulchers, and rear rakes—any and all implements to get rid of all that bothersome, “overgrown” jungle of brush and small trees that has taken over that neglected spot on one’s property.

Before you haul out the brush-hogzillas, please take a moment to check your calendar. What’s the month? April? May? June? July? If so, consider leaving the brush busters in the garage or barn until August or September.

Why? Do it for the birds! Let the wild birds have the whole impenetrable mess. In spring, birds have to run the gauntlet to protect their nests, eggs and chicks from domestic cats and dogs, coyotes, weasels, skunks, bobcats, ravens, jays, crows, snakes and squirrels. They need thickets, brambles and tangles for tucking their nests/eggs/chicks out of sight of just about anything that has eyes. If they find these safe havens, they’ll multiply and, in all likelihood, return to your yard and feeders again next year. If you leave the brush piles undisturbed till August or September, the baby birds will have fledged and flown from the nest.



Skagit County Master Gardener Mary Pat Larsen prefers to leave her brush piles untouched until late summer—August or September.

Photo by Marlee Osterbauer.

Being patient about brush-clearing ambitions will reward not only the birds, but you too. In spring the soil will still be quite wet from constant winter rains (especially this year) and snow. Running heavy machinery over wet soil will compact the soil much more than running that same machinery over soil that is dry, as it is in August and September. Any plants you may want to put in that compacted soil will do poorly (except for creeping buttercup). Also, drainage in the cleared spot can become a problem, changing the hydrology not only of the site you cleared, but surrounding places too. Water may bubble and pool up in places you never would have thought it would or even could. But once a large area of ground has been compacted with heavy machinery, only heavy machinery, with powerful digging implements, can “fluff” it up again.



Holding off on brush-clearing this spring will create numerous hiding places for wild birds to nest and raise their young. This bird recreational park came compliments of a November 2006 storm.

Photo by Mary Pat Larsen.

The mark of the Pacific Northwest forest has always been the impenetrable underbrush. This lush brush was the sign of everlasting rain. If you wanted a park-like forest floor, with sunshine to boot, you would go east of the Cascades. In western Washington, acres of thorny berry bushes are the rule, as are trailing blackberry (a.k.a. the devil's shoe laces), devil's club, and rotted, moss-covered, fallen logs. Migratory birds that come to the Pacific Northwest to breed, come especially because our native thickets are here—and they count on these thickets to protect their families.

If you're curious about what kinds of birds might make their home in your brush pile(s), here is a partial list of western Washington song birds that nest in or under brush:

Hummingbirds: These jewels of spring especially love blackberry thickets for their tiny ethereal lichen-decorated cups. Vicious blackberry vines not only provide them with enormous guard thorns, but also a handy nearby nectar source from blackberry blossoms.



Hummingbirds are more likely to return to your yard and feeders if you allow some blackberry vines to remain on your property. The thorns protect these tiny birds; the blossoms provide a nearby nectar source. Photo by Jason Miller.



White crowned sparrows love lower conifer branches, but will readily call a brush pile home sweet home. Photo by Jason Miller.

White crowned sparrows: These bold and spunky scolds who hang around your yard and tick at you when you get within 10 yards of their nests, seem especially to love the lower branches of conifers, but will also settle for waist-high plant benches between flower pots.

Swainson's thrushes. What would a summer in the Pacific Northwest be without the lilting, upward spiraling call of the male Swainson's thrush at dusk? When you hear the single clear whistle of their "on alert" call, though, keep your loppers out of the brush below.

Winter wrens: Spring won't come until the male winter wren makes his warbling, symphonic call from the depths of a nearby forest. This bird prefers to nest in cavities of root mats left by downed trees, at the bases of conifers or under stumps.

Orange-crowned warblers: Nests are tucked away three feet above the ground in shrubs or tangles.

Yellow Warblers: Nests are three to eight feet above ground. This bird nests in colonies and prefers willows, so ideally it needs a whole hedge-row of willows or at least half an acre of willow thicket.

Wilson's warbler: Nests on or near the ground in dense vegetation.

MacGillivray's warbler: Nests in small, thick shrubs one to five feet above ground.

Yellow-breasted chat: Nests two to six above ground in brush, briar tangles, vines and low trees.

How to build a brush pile

For bird lovers, the only thing worse than having a shrub thicket on one's property, is not having one. If you love birds but lack the appropriate accommodations, make a brush pile! Here's how:

- Find a corner in your yard to pile up tree and berry brush prunings. Birds will use just about any brush pile.
- Start with your biggest storm blowdown debris: tree branches 4-6 inches in diameter. Place these parallel to each other on the ground, thus making tunnels at the bottom for quick escape from pursuing predators.
- Place same size or slightly smaller branches at right angles to the first layer.
- Keep piling and criss-crossing branches until the structure is at least three feet high.
- Work in smaller branches, like fruit tree prunings. Weave the smaller wood around the larger pieces to make the structure stable.
- Last, make a roof of large evergreen branches over the top of the pile to conceal the interior.

Don't worry about neatness—the messier a brush pile, the better. But do take steps to prevent your brush pile from becoming a fire hazard: Always have a garden hose or some other readily available water source within range of the pile.