

Wildlife Watch in the fall

BROAD-TAILED HAWKS circle over the city in early September while migrating south for winter. Watch for RED-TAILED HAWKS hanging out in the Katy prairie or hunting from posts and power lines along our roadways.

Hang up those feeders! From late summer until mid-October newly fledged RUBY-THROATED HUMMINGBIRDS travel south with adults. Splotches of color on a juvenile's throat may make you think you've spotted a new species! The fall blooms of salvia, Turk's cap, and crossvine will have hummers hovering in your yard. Help them tank up for their 600 mile marathon flight across the Gulf! Maintaining feeders in winter may attract RUFOUS and BLACK-CHINNED HUMMERS that wander into Houston.

HUMMINGBIRDS migrate to Mexico and South America. To help fuel their furious flight, fill feeders with sugar solution (1 cup sugar to 4 cups water; boil, then cool). Store extra "hummer juice" in the refrigerator. A few ruby-throats stay here year 'round. Hummers spend a lot of energy protecting their nectar source, so space out your natural feeding stations around the yard with plantings of Hamelia patens, Salvia leucantha, Salvia coccinea, Turk's cap, Crossvine, and Trumpet creeper.

BUTTERFLIES are busy in our fall gardens. MONARCHS sip from Verbena, Ageratum and Mexican milkweed as they migrate towards Mexico. The PAINTED LADY prefers purple coneflower and thistles. Watch for QUESTION MARK butterflies in winged elm trees. Spot TIGER SWALLOWTAILS on buttonbush and Mexican plum trees. Your yard will come alive when you plant natives!

BUTTERFLIES are plentiful here September through November, so plant fall gardens to host them. Remember, caterpillars are eating your plants to become butterflies! That green caterpillar with black bands and yellow polka dots is the BLACK SWALLOWTAIL LARVAE competing with you for your dill and parsley. CLOUDLESS GIANT SULFUR BUTTERFLIES lay their eggs on cassia trees. Snapdragons and Ruellia will attract BUCKEYE BUTTERFLIES. TIGER SWALLOWTAILS will sip nectar from your blue plumbago shrubs. Let the orange and black GULF FRITILLARY BUTTERFLY LARVAE devour your passionvines. Host plants recover!

WARBLERS, RUBY-CROWNED KINGLETS, AND VIREOS find food and shelter in your Southern wax myrtle and magnolia trees. Stare into the tops of your oak trees and watch for movement. Then grab your binoculars to locate the migrating warblers and flycatchers gleaning insects from bark crevices. The tiny birds are "packing in protein" to power their flight.

PURPLE MARTINS and their offspring migrate south in August. Lower and clean their houses now. Install door caps or cover the entire house to keep out local sparrows and starlings. On February 15th, raise the house to welcome back the magnificent insect-eating martins.

GOLDFINCHES will be feasting from your thistle seed feeders mid-December through March.

ROSEBREASTED GROSBEAKS and other fall bird migrants relish the fruit from Mexican Plum trees. Many bird species are dependent on fatty fruits for the energy they need to migrate in fall. There aren't many leftovers on the American Beauty berry bushes after our local MOCKINGBIRDS, CARDINALS and BROWN THRASHERS have had their share of the bright purple berries. Did you know that Hackberry trees are at the top of "The List" for bird and butterfly food value? Then why is it often called a "trash tree"?

DRAGONFLIES catch our eye as they dart around Houston during our damp, hot summer and warm fall season. Naturalists know this insect as an indicator of healthy environments. Since dragonflies depend on water, land and air to complete all three phases of their life cycle, they are sensitive to changes in their habitat. Of note, the Texas Master Naturalist Program awards a dragonfly pin to newly certified naturalists. We've chosen the dragonfly to be a part of our new logo not only to catch your eye but also to remind you of the important connection between plants, animals and people.

VENTURE OUT FROM YOUR BACKYARD: Visit nearby Brazos Bend State Park for excellent fall birding and alligator watching. Go before the gators burrow in the mud for the winter. For in-town excursions, the Houston Arboretum has trails near Memorial Park where you may see huge PILEATED WOODPECKERS at work on old logs and BROWN THRASHERS and MOCKINGBIRDS savoring the brilliant purple fruits from the local American Beauty Berry shrubs. Don't miss the gigantic BULLFROG TADPOLES in the Arboretum's ponds!