



Forest Facts

TREES AND WILDLIFE

THE WOODS ARE WILD!

Can you imagine a forest without wildlife? Walk through any patch of woods and you will notice the presence of wild creatures: the rustle of squirrels hunting acorns among the leaves; the colorful flashes of warblers flitting among tree branches; the lingering smell of a skunk; a tickle of spider webs across your face. Whether it's a new forest of young pine seedlings, an older forest of towering oak trees or just one backyard maple, trees are home for many kinds of animals.

HOME, SWEET HABITAT

Habitat is another word for an animal's home. A habitat provides food, water, shelter, space and places to raise young. These habitat parts must be close enough to each other that animals can get to all of them when needed. Each animal has different habitat needs, which means that there is no single habitat that is good for all kinds of wildlife.



A TREE'S LIFE

Trees and forests do provide habitat for many kinds of Virginia wildlife. Even a single tree can be an important habitat feature. Consider a large, old oak tree. The tree is home to countless insects and spiders. Many kinds of songbirds, as well as lizards and tree frogs, feed on these small creatures. Birds and squirrels nest in the tree and eat its acorns. Deer, bear, turkeys and small rodents visit the tree to eat fallen acorns. Raccoons, flying squirrels and even a bear may den in hollow spaces in the tree. When the tree dies, more insects move in and so do the woodpeckers that feed on them. When the dead tree falls, skunks and bears tear it apart to find the insects. Mice, chipmunks and snakes shelter in its hollows, and salamanders and invertebrates live underneath the rotting log. If just one oak tree benefits so many animals, imagine hundreds of trees of many kinds growing together. Together they create a forest, which provides shelter, food and other habitat needs for many animals.



ACTIVITY

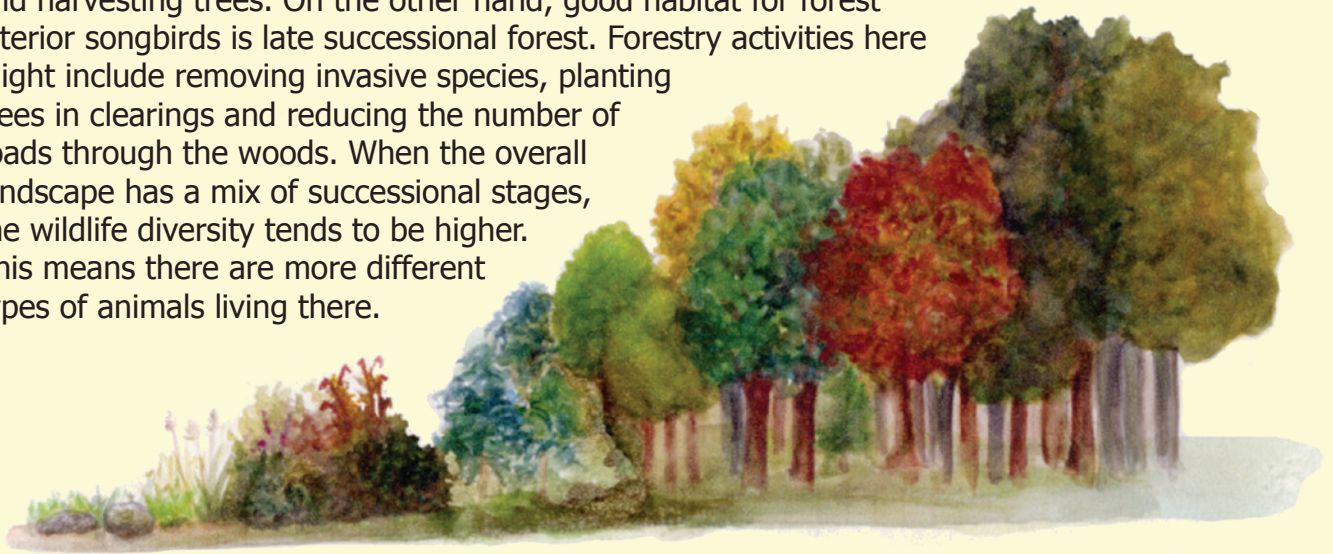
SEEKING SIGNS

You don't need a whole forest to look for signs of wildlife...you can check out one single tree! Find a tree in your yard, at school or in a nearby park. Examine it carefully and write down all the creatures and their signs that you find on or near the tree. Go back at different times of the year to observe changes. You might be surprised at the wildlife diversity!

SUCCESSION = CHANGE

All forests are in a constant state of change. Forest succession is the natural pattern of change in a forest over time. We can easily see succession happening in old farm fields or vacant lots. Certain plants tend to come in first, stay for a predictable length of time and then are replaced by other species. As the forest matures, the types of wildlife living there will also change.

Over time, if left to nature, most land in Virginia will become hardwood, or deciduous, forest. But natural disturbances, such as storms, pest outbreaks and fires, often set succession back to earlier stages. Humans also do things to keep succession at a particular stage, often to benefit wildlife. For example, good quail habitat is land in an early successional stage. Forestry practices that can create this type of forest include prescribed burning, mowing and harvesting trees. On the other hand, good habitat for forest interior songbirds is late successional forest. Forestry activities here might include removing invasive species, planting trees in clearings and reducing the number of roads through the woods. When the overall landscape has a mix of successional stages, the wildlife diversity tends to be higher. This means there are more different types of animals living there.



HABITAT AT HOME

The size and features of a property and nearby areas will affect the kinds and numbers of wildlife that can live there. For example, black bears are not likely to live on just a few acres, surrounded by houses and shopping centers. But, that type of property could provide good habitat features for raccoons, chipmunks or some songbirds.

Even if you have a very small property, there are some easy projects that will improve wildlife habitat in your own backyard. Some will make your yard look "messy." From the standpoint of wildlife, this is a good thing, but you may have to educate your neighbors!



HOME IMPROVEMENTS

- ◆ Soften the edge of your yard where it meets the woods, by planting layers of plants of different heights – small trees, shrubs and forbs (soft-stemmed plants).
- ◆ Stop mowing a small area and let the weeds take over. Use a field guide to make sure the weeds are native plants and not invasive exotic ones.
- ◆ Replace some flower beds with native flowering plants, which provide good food sources for insects and animals. As a bonus, native plants usually need less care. Perennial plants will return year after year and some native annuals will self seed.
- ◆ Plant native trees instead of exotic species. Insects are abundant on native trees; this is important, as insects are the main food of almost all baby songbirds.
- ◆ Create special features like downed logs, brush piles or a rock outcrop. Be aware that these may attract snakes, so you might want to place them farther from the house.
- ◆ Add a water feature, such as a birdbath, small pond or fountain.
- ◆ Put up a few other man-made habitat features, like nest boxes and bird feeders.

For more information on making your yard wildlife-friendly, visit these web sites:

Backyard habitats –

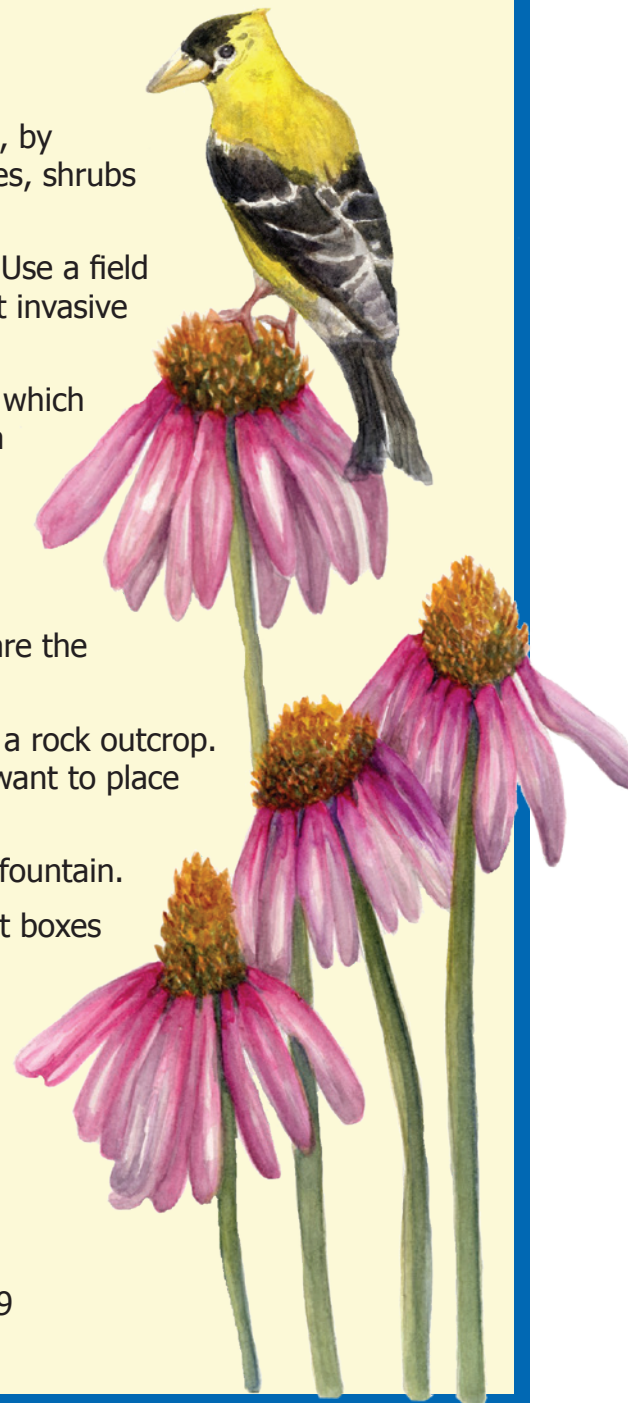
<https://dwr.virginia.gov/wildlife/habitat/>

Native plants –

<https://www.dcr.virginia.gov/natural-heritage/nativeplants>

Nest boxes –

<https://nestwatch.org/learn/all-about-birdhouses/?pid=1139>



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