

by Valerie Easton

Photographing and writing about birds isn't a hobby for this Whidbey Island couple — it's a mission

Backyard Bird Magic

CRAIG JOHNSON WAS photographing birds out in the field, sharing his work with Audubon, long before he was confined to a wheelchair. Since 2008, he has been observing and photographing birds in his back garden on Whidbey Island — also a rich birding/wildlife experience.

"I've spent thousands of hours out there, just being with the birds," he says. "All year round, there's plenty of activity to watch."

Craig and his wife, Joy, have created a habitat island in a neighborhood of groomed lawns and rhododendrons. Their small front yard fits right in, but around back they've left underbrush piled up around the margins where the lawn transitions to native plantings. A shady, hushed woodland beneath a canopy of firs attracts and nurtures a wide variety of birds. A madrona snag suits the woodpeckers, and the Johnsons have left the garden duff thick on the ground.

"When you learn what birds eat, you start to appreciate all the worms, larvae and insects in the duff," Joy says.

"Feeders aren't the draw," says Craig, although a couple of hummers are fighting over a feeder near the front porch. The couple considers these floating flowers of the bird world a gateway species. Hummingbirds are so gregarious, so unafraid of humans, that they intrigue people into paying more attention to the many kinds of birds living all around us.

What lured Craig and Joy into their fascination with avian life?

"We used to live in Edmonds, and when we went for walks we saw so many birds in the wood lots and near the water," says Craig. But they mourned the loss of habitat as Edmonds became more developed.

"It felt like such a disconnect between the human and natural world," Joy says. After they moved to Whidbey, Craig, who is an artist and illustrator, began to photograph birds.

Now the couple is active in educating kids and adults about backyard birds.

"When we talk to garden clubs, people are so relieved that they can leave leaf litter lying around," Joy says. They most love talking with kindergarten- and elementary-age kids, who respond so readily to the magic of birds. The Johnsons have captured this in their lively and humorous DVD, "Pacific Northwest Birds and Backyard Wildlife Habitat," all filmed in their own garden.

So how were the Johnsons able to draw enough kinglets and warblers, chickadees, robins, quail, goldfinch and bushtits to



PHOTOS COURTESY CRAIG JOHNSON

An Anna's hummingbird enjoys fresh apple juice.



This juvenile male Northern Flicker, on a dead madrona spar, has an Oregon grape berry in its beak.



A female Varied Thrush suns herself on the brush pile in the Johnsons' backyard.



A Dark-eyed Junco forages for larvae in garden duff.

MORE ONLINE


Learn more, including how to order the Johnsons' books, brochures, coloring book (a free download) and the DVD "Pacific Northwest Birds and Backyard Wildlife Habitat" (which is free to educators), at pugetsoundbackyardbirds.com.

film a movie of bird activity in their back garden?

"Habitat-building can be as simple as a dirt path so the birds can take a bath to get rid of mites and parasites," says Craig. They never use chemicals. A hedgerow of native plants, including salal, ocean spray, Oregon grape, salmon-berry and wild roses provides forage, food and shelter. They meet birds' need for water with a simple birdbath, kept scrupulously clean, and a tabletop fountain on their deck to supply the running water that attracts birds to drink and bathe.

"Studying, photographing and writing about birds has never been a hobby for us," says Craig. "It's been a mission."

And which birds have become their favorites?

"Chickadees, along with quail and towhees, are a gardener's companions," Joy says. 

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