

Fifteen Small Things that Make a Big Difference for Wildlife

Choose them all, or start with one. Every little bit helps.

1. **Teach the children (and willing adults) in your life to love and respect wild animals and special places.** You needn't be an expert; just share whatever is dear to you with those around you. We only make an effort to protect what we appreciate and understand. Too many people feel removed from nature, seemingly unaware of their dependence upon it.
2. **Manage your property as habitat.** Leave part of your property wild and natural. If it's already all lawn, consider replacing any portions that go unused with native plants. Natives can be beautiful, and they have co-evolved with the local wildlife to support a healthy natural community. Look for the Rhody Native™ tag to identify plants that are a step beyond native species; they're genetically local and genetically diverse (evolved right here in Rhode Island), and you'll be helping the local economy to boot! Consider providing water (make sure to keep it clean) and cover (brush piles, etc.). If at all possible, wait until fall to trim trees and shrubs or mow fields. You can avoid a lot of damage to nests and dispersing young by doing so. Show the improvements made to your neighbors and encourage them to follow your example. The arrival of new and beautiful birds and butterflies may even do the convincing for you!
3. **Minimize your own use of pesticides and fertilizers** and look for products grown according to these same standards. Targeting a single "pest" species often has unintended and undesirable consequences. For example, pesticides reduce food availability for birds by reducing insect diversity. Many of these chemicals harm wildlife, especially bees, butterflies, and other beneficial insects, and they often find their way into our local waters, causing algal blooms and other problems. Integrated Pest Management (IPM) is one alternative that relies on the science of pests, their life cycles, and their broader relationship to the environment to derive environmentally sensitive management approaches that minimize pesticide use. Organic methods like composting and leaf mulching can give you great results without posing any risk (or costing any money) at all!
4. **Encourage good stewardship throughout your community.** Advocate for the use of wildlife-friendly practices in public spaces. Support wildlife habitat-friendly legislation and sound, science-based wildlife management. Support your local businesses if they are practicing good stewardship, and gently nudge them if they are not. Consumers are very powerful, so vote with your dollars!
5. **Educate yourself and be an ingredient reader.** Remember that *everything* we use, indoors and out ends up in our environment. From where we wash our cars, to the food we eat, to the laundry detergent we choose, we make choices every day that affect local (and sometimes not-so-local) water quality and the humans and wildlife that rely on those waters. Research natural ways of achieving your goals – there is a wealth of information at your fingertips.
6. **Keep dogs away from wildlife.** Respect signage that restricts or disallows pets. It may seem disappointing to not be able to take your dog exploring, but they can cause a lot of problems for wildlife (stress, disease predation). Whether posted or not, dogs should be leashed or otherwise under control when walking through forests and other wildlife areas so as to keep them away from wildlife and their homes and nests, especially during the breeding and nesting seasons.
7. **Keep cats indoors** and have your pets spayed or neutered. According to the [American Bird Conservancy](#) (ABC), domestic and feral cats kill an estimated half to one billion birds a year in the United States. Putting a bell on a cat may seem like a reasonable solution, but cats can learn to walk silently while wearing a bell, and birds do not actually register a ringing bell as a warning sound. Outdoor cats also kill snakes, amphibians, and small mammals.
8. **Be informed and support local conservation.** Conservation includes protecting natural areas in perpetuity, but it also means making sure that development that does occur is well planned, makes sense on the landscape, and is as people and wildlife-friendly as possible. As undeveloped land becomes rarer, protecting habitat is increasingly vital to fulfilling our responsibility to conserve wildlife and the places they live for future generations. Luckily, many of the same measures that help our local wildlife also help keep our air and water clean and preserve community character.
9. **Don't release pets into the wild.** Many people think it is harmless to drop aquarium fish, frogs or turtles into local ponds; however, animals from the pet trade don't appreciate the gesture (and in many cases, it's illegal). They often suffer and die when released into the wild, while those that are successful can disrupt the existing ecosystem and may prove invasive. They also may introduce diseases that are new to an area and that native species aren't equipped to fend off.

10. **Be a waste watcher.** Of course you shouldn't litter and you should try to recycle as much as possible, but it's also important to reduce your waste in the first place by avoiding single use products and packaging as much as possible. Most of what goes into our recycling bins is not infinitely recyclable and eventually becomes trash. According to the EPA, plastics and other marine debris not only cause direct harm to marine species (ingestion, laceration, entanglement, suffocation), but also degrade habitat, harm tourism and fishing (reduced stock, damage to gear), and present a safety hazard that can damage boats and even injure humans.
11. **Minimize light pollution and save on your energy bill while helping birds, bats, and other wildlife.** Turn off outdoor lights and draw the curtains/blinds at night, especially during peak migration seasons (spring and fall). Since migrating and nocturnal birds rely on the moon, stars, and setting sun for navigation, artificial lighting can attract these birds and cause them to collide with buildings and other tall structures. The American Bird Conservancy (ABC) has stated that hundreds of millions of birds die each year from strikes with manmade structures. Birds can also become confused by reflections on windows during the day. ABC's website has a lot of good information on how to avoid bird strikes around the home, including treating windows so they don't fly into the glass. While birds are perhaps the most studied example of the impacts that artificial lighting can have on behavior, this type of pollution disrupts the natural rhythms of many species of plants and animals. An obvious example is all the harmless insects that are drawn to outdoor lights (and Bug Zappers!) and die. The loss of these animals means less butterflies and moths and less food for birds and bats.

You could also advocate for a "Lights Out" ordinance in your community or start a voluntary Lights Out pledge campaign. Both Block Island and Charlestown already have outdoor lighting ordinances that might serve as models. Additionally, the International Dark-Sky Association is an excellent reference on the effects of artificial lighting and how to minimize them.

12. **Don't feed wild animals.** If done responsibly, feeding backyard birds is not harmful. However, feeding waterfowl and other wildlife or leaving pet food out and accessible to wild animals can cause numerous problems. It encourages dependence on humans and the loss of their natural fear of us. Both of these situations create increased conflicts between humans and animals, which can be dangerous for both. Animals that are fed, such as ducks, geese, and deer, tend to congregate much more tightly than they otherwise would. Combined with the fact that much of their nutrient dense natural diet is replaced with empty calories from human food, these cramped conditions lead to increased diseases, some of which can be spread to humans. Accordingly, with a few exceptions that include backyard birds, *feeding wild animals is illegal in Rhode Island*.
13. **Drive slowly and alertly** on rural roads and especially within state wildlife management areas. Vehicle strikes are a major threat to a large number of Rhode Island's wildlife species
14. **Be respectful and keep your distance.** Make every effort to enjoy our local plants and animals in a manner that leaves both of you safe from harm. Most of the time people try to assist injured, sick or orphaned animals; they end up doing more harm than good. People often misunderstand the behaviors and cues of wild animals and end up causing stress or injury to animals that were not really in need of help. Even simple things like trying to get a great nature photograph can be hazardous to an animal that is stressed (examples are birds looking for food before a long flight and wintering bats, both of which may not survive if forced to expend energy avoiding a perceived threat).
15. **Don't pass on your prejudice.** So you simply can't get over your fear of spiders, or snakes, or bats even though you know deep down that your fear is not grounded in fact? Try not to pass this fear on to your child, niece, or nephew. Instead of using words like "creepy" and "gross", encourage children's innate curiosity and love of the natural world. You can still teach them to keep a respectful distance. This way, you can feel good about doing your part to protect important critters even if you can't quite get past your own trepidation!

Additional Sources and Links:

<http://ocean.nationalgeographic.com/ocean/take-action/10-things-you-can-do-to-save-the-ocean/>
http://water.epa.gov/type/oceb/marinedebris/md_impacts.cfm
<http://www.abcbirds.org/conservationissues/threats/index.html>
http://www.lbp.org.uk/downloads/Publications/Management/lighting_and_bats.pdf
<https://www.cityofboston.gov/environmentalandenergy/conservation/lightsoutboston.asp>
<http://www.flap.org/index.php>
www.nwf.org/Get-Outside/Outdoor-Activities/Garden-for-Wildlife.aspx

You can also contact the RI Wildlife Action Plan Community Liaison at dem.rwap@dem.ri.gov