
COME HERE, MY LITTLE CHICKADEE YOUR HABITAT AWAITS

BY STEVEN BIGGS
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRISTINA SHARMA



I reckon I've found the right property when I see a snowy boulevard sprouting milkweed stalks bedecked with silk-laden pods. The place really stands out because here in suburban Etobicoke, the landscaping can be quite conservative: vast lawns with big trees punctuating the look-alike streets of post-war homes that are chequered with large new homes.

With time to spare, I decide to investigate the back garden. The new snow muffles any noise and, aside from the constant din of the highway in the background, it is surprisingly quiet for a weekday afternoon. Walking alongside the house towards the gate, the silence gives way to a chorus of gossiping birds. I recognize the calls of goldfinches and chickadees, and there are others, too, that I don't recognize. Then, taking one step too many, I cross an invisible boundary line and they all flutter from the feeding stations into a tall silver maple. The silence returns, interrupted by the odd scolding chirp directed my way, leaving me to look at bird feeders and niger seed scattered like black pepper on the snow.

Christina Sharma appears, and we walk through the snow to a spot farther away from the feeders so the birds can return to their meal. Now it's time to learn about her garden, its unusual variety of songbirds, and Project CHIRP!, her educational program promoting the creation of urban songbird habitat.

Sharma identifies some of the nearby birds: thrushes, juncos, red-breasted nuthatches, downy woodpeckers, and goldfinches. The previous day she counted forty-five goldfinches in her garden. Though they are more common than some of the other species, their endearing, shy-sounding entreaty makes them one of her favourite species.

With the objective of inspiring, educating, and assisting people in the Toronto area to create residential songbird habitats, Project CHIRP! brings together gardening and songbird conservation. CHIRP is an acronym for Creating Habitat in Residential Areas and Parkland. While Sharma has focused her own efforts on songbird conservation, her environmental credo – and the message she hopes to pass along to others – is much broader: “It is what you as an individual can do.”

THE MAKING OF CHIRP!

Sharma founded Project CHIRP! in 2007, using the design of her property as a teaching tool. To reach out to as many people as possible,

Sharma gives workshops on creating urban songbird habitat, advising people on what they can do at home and how they can change their habits as consumers. She also offers guided tours of her garden to complement the theory from the workshops. Along with these, Sharma runs a website with tips to help people make their properties bird-friendly. “As I learn things myself that I think are helpful, I'll put them on the website,” she says.

When I guess at the Latin name of one of the shrubs, she downplays her knowledge and gives credit to Charles Kinsley, the native plant expert and designer who conceived of her front and back gardens to be pleasing to both birds and her family. As we go through the yard, though, it's clear that she knows every plant and its place in this habitat.

Sharma was originally attracted to this Etobicoke neighbourhood by the big trees and open areas. But as she learned more about songbird habitats, she realized that this typical suburban environment is not welcoming to songbirds. Quite the contrary: It provides a good vista for predatory birds such as hawks, and the monoculture of grass and annuals provides scant food and water for songbirds.

There's a country connection to this urban garden: While growing up in the city, Sharma spent her weekends at the family sheep farm in Moira, Ontario. She describes her delight at trekking to a nearby pond and finding tadpoles, dragonflies and frogs. When her family sold the farm, she missed having somewhere to observe nature, so she has recreated some of that magic here, on a smaller scale.

NOT BY ACCIDENT

While the garden may appear uncontrived, much of what Sharma shows me is intentional. She points to a pile of logs and brush and explains that it's not the haphazard pile it seems to be: she'd laid it out in a specific manner that makes it an appealing shelter to wildlife. Round stumps poke up through the snow. The stumps, she explains, appeal to her aesthetic sense. But more than that, the woodpeckers often peck at them in search of insects, and squirrels perch upon them while eating.

Her efforts have paid off. Along with the wide variety of songbirds, she has seen a fox in the yard and there's an opossum that regularly visits. The resident frogs found the pond on their own. The allure to wildlife is no surprise because this doesn't look like a suburban yard. Underneath two large maple trees are many smaller trees, large shrubs, and small

Above: Goldfinches



shrubs. The octopus-like branches of a pagoda dogwood reach out to welcome newcomers to the yard, and provocative, lipstick-red branch tips on another nearby dogwood entice visitors farther into the yard, where snowberries and rosehips are still on display on this snowy day.

Sharma says she likes native species such as the dogwoods because they support wildlife and because they are suited to the climate here. A good example of a native plant that supports wildlife is the milkweed in her boulevard, which is the favoured host of monarch butterflies. She shows me some meadowsweet, a native plant that she likes because it produces ample seed for birds. “Don’t cut it till spring,” she advises, explaining that this delayed cleanup leaves seeds for birds to forage over the winter. By combining the right species in the right manner, Sharma hopes to make a space where the birds want to “hang out” – and it’s obviously working well.

The native species provide edible seeds and berries, and runoff from her garage roof flows into the small pond that provides water and habitat. Like any natural environment, it has evolved. In the beginning, the pond had a lot of sunlight and was home to water beetles and dragonflies. Sharma explains that, as the trees and shrubs grew and the pond became shaded, the water beetles left and different species moved in.

MAKING IT SIMPLE

As we discuss her advice for people wanting to make songbird-friendly habitat, I sense that teaching comes easily to her. She frames her messages so that they are easy to understand. “Think of their needs as you would your own,” she says, explaining that this means water, food, shelter and space – year-round. We laugh about the next piece of advice, which sounds like something that a marriage counsellor might say: “You can live together,” she says with a smile.

Sharma’s garden was the first to be certified by the Canadian Wildlife Federation’s (CWF) Backyard Habitat Certification Program. She encourages people to visit the CWF website to learn about wildlife-friendly gardening and to certify their properties as songbird habitats. Her association with the CWF is no surprise: She has been a volunteer since 2001, and she uses some of their materials in her workshops.

Sharma advocates consumer awareness along with bird-friendly gardens. She gives the examples of shade-grown coffee which, she explains, is grown in a manner that preserves the forest canopy for songbirds; and

paper products approved by the Forestry Stewardship Council (FSC), which promotes selective logging instead of clear cutting.

Despite the best of intentions, some things don’t go as planned. Sharma explains her disappointment that some sizeable trees on a neighbouring property are being taken down as a new house is erected. The trees are beside her property line, very close to a number of her feeding stations. “Talk to your neighbours,” she advises, noting that instead of fences, some people might be interested in planting bird-friendly species along the property line.

While Sharma refers to herself as a layperson, her commitment to environmental issues has not gone unrecognized. In 2002 she won the Queens Golden Jubilee Medal after her local MP nominated her. The nomination stemmed from her efforts in setting up a neighbourhood environmental awareness display. She finds it gratifying that neighbours have asked, “Are you going to be doing that again?”, even though she ran the event back in 2001.

When I ask how she hopes to see Project CHIRP! evolve, Sharma notes, “It’s in its infancy.” Still, she gave fourteen talks to clubs, businesses and community groups in the past year. She also feels there’s room to form alliances with people who can help homeowners who want further expertise, and maybe set up a landscaping and consulting branch.

Sharma likes connecting with people and being able to share her passion. “If you feel the drive to get out then you’ve probably got a message to listen to.” She recounts how, early on, when the songbirds started coming and singing, she felt like she wanted to go out into the street and shout. Well, now she has. It’s about what she, as an individual, can do. □

Project CHIRP!

www.projectchirp.com
(416) 236-7234

Canadian Wildlife Federation

Gardening site: www.wildaboutgardening.org
Home site: www.cwf-fcf.org

Steven Biggs is a freelance writer, horticulturist and garden consultant. Next to gardening, one of his favourite pastimes is cooking food he has grown or sourced locally. Read his tips on growing vegetables at www.the-locavores-garden.com.