

Mecklenburg Audubon Society

Backyard Notes: Brush Piles



The last couple of weeks high winds have knocked down some tree limbs in the yard. Before you feed those branches to the chipper for mulching think about using them to start a brush pile. Even in a small yard a brush pile can provide needed cover and make your yard more accommodating for birds and other critters.

Over the past few months we have talked about ways to improve your backyard habitat by providing food, water and nesting spots for our feathered friends. The final piece to the backyard habitat puzzle is providing cover or shelter for the birds. And that is what a brush pile does all year round.

It's not hard to start a brush pile but you will have to give up the idea that your backyard will be immaculate. Brush piles are a bit untidy but the benefits are well worth the minor mess. They also don't cost anything to build except a little physical energy.

When creating your brush pile start with large branches as a foundation. I started one of my piles with several limbs that fell during a storm. You don't have to cut the side branches off. They will help maintain holes and crevices in the pile that birds can hide in. After you have laid the foundation then add small branches and twigs. Don't pack things down. What you want to do is create a pile of 'stuff' that the birds can get into for

shelter. One year I wandered my neighborhood collecting discarded Christmas trees to start a second brush pile further back in the woods behind my house. They are a great foundation for a brush pile. Once you have a brush pile started it does need to be 'fed' periodically because the stuff on the bottom does decompose. So like a fire, every so often add more branches and twigs to build it up again.

I have one of my brush piles is near my feeders. This allows the birds a quick hiding spot when predators appear. The cardinals use the brush pile as their staging area. They first fly to the pile. Check out the neighborhood and then hop up onto the feeder. During snows I have seen doves, wren, sparrows, towhees and thrashers all using

the pile for shelter. The years I have had fox sparrows in my yard they have always hung out around the brush pile. The wrens and sparrows also patrol the pile for hidden bugs. So it not only provides shelter, it's also a fast food joint! I have also seen chipmunks hiding in it.

So this spring as you begin picking up your yard, don't mulch those branches and twigs. Start building a small apartment complex for the birds! You will be repaid with hours of watching enjoyment.



