



## Bird by bird to eat bug by bug

Posted by [Josh Willis](#)

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[Josh Willis](#)

[Bird by bird to eat bug by bug](#)

January 26, 2023 06:54AM

Registered: 6 years ago

Posts: 134

Ok, we know those chickens are great for eating PC, maggots, and generally pest grubs galore. Has anyone experimented with attracting wild birds to do their dirty work for them?

I was clicking around the HON site, and as often happens, while I was looking for one key revelation, I stumbled across another. Michael's post of Laura Ingals Wilder's orcharding is a fun read. I'm not sure if it is equally bucolic and fantastical, or if 1912 was really just a lovely time to grow this crop in Americas. Here's the link.

[[groworganicapples.com](http://groworganicapples.com)]

Anyways, her description of her local quail and other game birds making short work of fruit pests got me thinking. What local ground birds can I attract? And is it worth it? Do we know if other birds have a similar predilection for grubs and insects as chickens and hogs? I'm assuming ground birds are the first tier, but if some specific bird boxes do the trick, too, that would be good to know.

Restoring game habitat is, here in MD and likely elsewhere, it's own worthy study, filled with warm grasses that used to cover the grasslands here, as well as the usual wildflower mixes, and establishing good roosting sites (wait, now I want to re-grow those decades of brambles we just finally cut back?). But before I invest too much time into it, I thought I'd ask HON if others have explored this direction, as well, and had success both attracting local pest control and asked for the receipts, as it were.

Earthworks

Zone 7a in West-Central MD

Non-commercial, ~100 fruit trees, dwarf to MM106

[Reply Quote](#)

[Charlie Showers](#)

[Re: Bird by bird to eat bug by bug](#)

January 26, 2023 02:28PM

Registered: 2 years ago

Posts: 18

Google drive link for some papers and articles I have collected along the way in regards to the positive impact of birds and other biodiversity in orchards, mostly Australian studies however there might be some useful thoughts to ponder in here for my North American friends.

[[drive.google.com](http://drive.google.com)]

[Black Barn Farm](#)

Zone 8b in Victoria, Australia

[Reply Quote](#)

[Mike Biltonen](#)

[Re: Bird by bird to eat bug by bug](#)

January 26, 2023 02:36PM

Registered: 10 years ago

Posts: 298

There is so much we have to explore with whole concept. In many ways we are behind in this country because of our absurd (in many ways) approach to farming and biodiversity (including mal-applied food safety laws). Anyway, how we establish and maintain the orchard understory is critical to the approach of encouraging biodiversity. Pesticide choice and use is but one aspect; encouraging appropriate biodiversity is next level thinking. I have more to add to this thread, but offer these two links as additional resources to Josh and Charlie's.

[[hvfarmscape.org](http://hvfarmscape.org)]

[[hvfarmscape.org](http://hvfarmscape.org)]

[Mike Biltonen, Know Your Roots](#)

Zone 5b in New York

[Reply Quote](#)

[Alan Surprenant](#)

[Re: Bird by bird to eat bug by bug](#)

January 26, 2023 02:43PM

Registered: 10 years ago

Posts: 22

I think helping create a diverse flora and fauna around our orchards is a noble task. AND not to rain (snow) on the parade..... birds also like to sample the ripeness of your fruit, in particular blue jays and crows. My experience is that their populations come in waves (like most things) and when the populations are high they land in the top of the tree and make one or two pecks into the fruit. Usually the fruit with the best color because it's on the top of the tree where it's the easiest for the birds to land. If you get rain after pecking but before picking that peck hole fills with water to aid in the rotting process. But the best part is when the unknowing picker (usually me) climbs the ladder to pick the fruit the picker picks the apple and all the liquid runs down your arm..... and then you toss away the apple.

[Brook Farm Orchard](#)

Zone 5 in Massachusetts

[Reply Quote](#)

[Carol Gudz](#)

[Re: Bird by bird to eat bug by bug](#)

January 28, 2023 06:17AM

Registered: 1 year ago

Posts: 21

We have installed about 20 nest boxes which are mostly occupied by blue birds. They are well-used throughout the growing season. I can't say what the exact impact is on insects.

We use bird netting for our haskap bushes (cedar wax wings live haskaps), cherries and grapes. We also use electric fencing around the grapes and cherries to dissuade wild turkeys and raccoons. Without netting we get almost zero yield of these crops.

We leave a portion of each crop in-netted to share with wildlife.

It is truly wonderful to see the various species-I am delighted to be able to support them in some small way and can't help but think that their being on our farm is beneficial to the overall ecosystem of our orchard.

[Reply Quote](#)

[Steve Dagger](#)

[Re: Bird by bird to eat bug by bug](#)

January 30, 2023 08:18PM

Registered: 9 years ago

Posts: 28

Thanks to all for the links and comments.

I'll second Mike's important points about "whole concept", attention to orchard understory and environs along with the need to think in larger landscape terms and coordinate with surrounding land stewards. In the U.S., the newer farm bill and NRCS programs and local Conservation Districts can be helpful with ideas and funding for biodiversity efforts on your place.

I'll also second Alan and Carol's comments on the down sides of birds and fruit. Depending on how much you need to get a regular yield of quality fruit you will also need bird netting and electric or other fencing. Nothing new here. It is the same for all animal pests. Whenever you grow a concentrated and/or preferred food source suitable to locally adapted lifeforms they will try to move in and expand their populations. And, whenever natural alternate food sources are diminished due to severe weather or habitat loss that pressure will increase exponentially.

Soooo... work toward a farmscape mix and cultural treatments that tend to balance predator and prey species abundance and expect to share your bounty with your free-roaming, wild neighbors and all the other ubiquitous bugs. As a recent sign I saw in a local cafe says; "the world doesn't have to be perfect to be wonderful."

[Pommes de Terre Acres](#)

USDA Zone 5 - Dixon, Montana

Intermountain West Region

[Reply Quote](#)

[Josh Willis](#)

[Re: Bird by bird to eat bug by bug](#)

January 30, 2023 10:28PM

Registered: 6 years ago

Posts: 134

Thanks everybody for your many thoughts on the question. I think we have perhaps two branches of inquiry here. First, as I'll try to restate, is the following. Does attracting wild birds demonstrably reduce pest pressure? Via either pecking at infested fruit, such as PC larvae, or eating insects on the tree trunk or canopy? If so, which specific birds and which specific pests?

The second question, it seems, is whether a biodiverse environs is good for our orchards. I would think we would all agree in the affirmative on this one. Although as Alan, Carol, and Steve point out, there are nuances to living with friends of a feather. We found one of the benefits of accidentally growing 30' fruit trees is there is usually enough to share, and honestly we aren't able to harvest the highest growing fruit in any case. We've actually found this to be a very effective "macro guild" approach, as the birds are usually too busy feasting on our black cherry and mulberry volunteers, which are also 30', to bother our blueberries. It helps to ensure overlapping ripening periods, in this respect. That said, I imagine an orchard of dwarf trees is much harder with birds!

Charlie and Mike, thanks for the links, I'm looking fwd to reading them. A quick look at Charlie's docs and I saw this snippet, which may sum up each branch of inquiry.

"A small subset of bird species was observed foraging on apples yet the effect of birds as agents of fruit damage appeared rather minor and

birds did not reduce *C. pomonella* damage. Our results demonstrate that organic apple orchards have the potential to provide habitat for diverse bird communities, including species typically sensitive to human activities, with little apparent effect on production (for good or bad -jw)." (Mangan, et al., 2017)

In other words, in this particular study, birds didn't do much for orchard production, but orchards were good for bird production! ;)

That said, I'll still be dreaming of quails, pheasants, grouses, and turkeys visiting for a June drop dinner.

Earthworks

Zone 7a in West-Central MD

Non-commercial, ~100 fruit trees, dwarf to MM106

[Reply](#) [Quote](#)

[Prairie Sundance](#)

[Re: Bird by bird to eat bug by bug](#)

February 01, 2023 12:38PM

Registered: 2 years ago

Posts: 47

This publication by NRCS includes a collection of studies on birds in agriculture, showing, among other things a notable reduction in overwintering codling moth larvae and codling moth overall, as well as many other promising results with economics in mind. Also includes a guide as to who eats what and how to attract them. Good timing to be thinking about this as you want to have your nest boxes ready early, thanks for posting and reminding me to review this bulletin for our own use!

[[d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net](https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net)]

We're on the front end of our "bird friends" program here, and do not have a control planned to offer as comparison, but will happily report developments.

Edited 1 time(s). Last edit at 02/01/2023 12:40PM by Prairie Sundance.

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