

# Keeping Riparian Habitats Healthy

*Using birds to measure the health of your riparian habitat.*

**How do you know if your riparian is healthy?** Look for these 12 riparian focal species—together they feed and nest in the different layers of a healthy riparian forest. **The more of these birds, the healthier your riparian habitat!**

**What is riparian habitat?** The plant life that borders creeks, rivers, lakes, and other water bodies. It provides essential water, food, nesting sites, stopover sites during migration, and places to live during the winter for numerous bird and other wildlife species. It also helps to create clean air and water and decrease erosion.

**Find more tips for keeping your riparian habitat healthy are on the other side of this flyer!**

**Riparian Obligate Species:** Birds that *only* use riparian habitat for nesting.

	<b>Yellow Warbler</b>	<b>Common Yellowthroat</b>	<b>Yellow-breasted Chat</b>	<b>Song Sparrow</b>	<b>Black-headed Grosbeak</b>	<b>Blue Grosbeak</b>	<b>Warbling Vireo</b>
							
<b>How to Identify</b>	Reddish streaks on chest and belly distinct in males, faint or absent in females	Broad black “bandit” mask in males. Females lack the mask but have a whitish ring around the eye	Larger than other warblers with long tail and thick bill. Song is unmusical jumble of harsh chattering clucks, squawks, and clear whistles	Streaking on the breast and sides. Dark stripe originating at eye and extending towards back of the head. Males and females look alike	Male has orange breast and belly, all black head. Female has streaked cinnamon underparts and striped head	Male is blue overall with chestnut-brown stripes through wings. Females light brown overall, often with tinges of blue on rump and tail	Olive-gray on back with white underparts often washed yellow. Distinctive white “eyebrow.” Males and females look alike
<b>Nest Site</b>	deciduous tree canopy; streamside alders, willows, and cottonwoods	densely vegetated marshes or wetlands; in cattails or tules 1-2’ above the ground	low, dense shrubs; within a couple feet of the ground, most commonly in blackberry	sedges, grasses, and rushes within a few feet of water	younger willows, cottonwoods, and alders, 8 -20’ tall	streamside herbaceous forbs and annuals	high in large deciduous trees
<b>Time of Year</b>	Nesting season	Year-round	Nesting season	Year-round	Nesting season	Nesting season	Nesting season
<b>Beneficial Plants</b>	Streamside alders, mature willows and cottonwoods	Cattails, tules, reeds, sedges	California blackberry, wild rose	In-stream and streamside sedges, grasses, rushes	Young willows and cottonwoods, berry-producing plants: elderberry, California blackberry, wild grape	Prefers streamside tall forbs for nest placement, e.g. monkey flower, thistle, mustard, dock	Tall deciduous trees: cottonwood, alder, willow, sycamore

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<b>Riparian Associate Species:</b> Birds that <i>will</i> use riparian habitat for nesting					
	<b>Lazuli Bunting</b>	<b>Nuttall's Woodpecker</b>	<b>Ash-throated Flycatcher</b>	<b>Bewick's Wren</b>	<b>Spotted Towhee</b>
					
<b>How to Identify</b>	Male bright turquoise above with cinnamon across breast and white belly; Female grayish-brown overall with some turquoise in wings and tail	Black and white barring down back; Male with red on top of head, female without	Brown on back with long rufous tail and yellow wash to belly; Males and females look alike	Small but vocal bird; Clear white eyebrow; Tail held up when perched; Males and females look alike	Male has glossy black hood, red eye, white spotting on back and cinnamon flanks; Female looks similar but black parts are duller
<b>Nest Site</b>	within 2–4 feet of the ground in dense shrubs	Excavates cavities in large trees and standing snags	cavities that have already been excavated in large trees	small cavities or crevices in trees, snags, rock piles, wood debris or any other cavity-like site	directly on the ground next to herbaceous plants
<b>Time of Year</b>	Nesting season	Year-round	Nesting season	Year-round	Nesting season
<b>Beneficial Plants</b>	California blackberry, wild rose, gooseberry, and other shrubby native bushes	Standing dead snags, large mature trees with both living and dead branches	Large mature trees including cottonwood, oaks, and willows	Standing dead snags, fallen logs, exposed roots, Valley Oak	Mugwort, poison oak, California blackberry, native grasses, fallen logs, heavy leaf litter

## How you can help

- **Get to know the birds** that are using your riparian habitat.
- **Identify** plants or habitat features you could add to increase riparian health.
- **Install fencing** to control livestock access to the riparian area during the nesting season and to facilitate “flash grazing.”
- **Install nest boxes** in young or newly restored riparian areas.
- **Build water crossings** to facilitate the movement of livestock between pastures to prevent damage to the water channel or surrounding vegetation.
- **Avoid using pesticides** within the riparian area.
- **Leave fallen logs, dead trees and dead limbs** for cavity nesting birds.
- **Plant native** grasses, flowers, shrubs, and trees to create habitat for nesting birds.

### Limit Disturbance During the Nesting Season: late March through early August

- Birds use riparian habitat year-round but are most sensitive during nesting.
- Grazing, mowing, herbicide application and other management activities can disturb nesting birds.
- Disturbance leads to nest abandonment, the elimination of nest sites, destroying nests, exposing nests to predators, or decreasing food sources such as insects.
- The nesting season is a critical period in birds’ lives to sustain healthy population levels.

**Contact us for more information or help identifying the birds that are using your riparian habitat!**  
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***NRCS offers technical and financial assistance for actions that benefit riparian habitat.***