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**Build a Brush Pile**

**Create Winter Habitats for Birds and Wildlife with a Backyard Brush Pile**

**by Diane Cooledge Porter**



**In winter, the tufted titmouse and other woodland birds seek refuge in dense piles of brush. (©Diane Cooledge Porter).**

In a natural landscape, brush piles happen without any assistance from people. In the woods, storm-felled trees and branches take on new life as havens for birds and wild animals. Toads, salamanders, insects, and spiders live in the tangled brush on the forest floor, creating a smorgasbord of delicacies. Streams at flood stage pile up fortresses of wrecked branches, where waterthrushes, common yellowthroats, catbirds, swamp sparrows, and many other species find shelter and good foraging.

We humans try to control all that. We channelize our streams. We manicure our landscapes. And the diminished natural habitat translates into less wildlife diversity—fewer birds in our lives. However, as birdwatchers we can help to put habitat back. One way is to construct a brush pile. Build one in your backyard, and your home will become a richer place.

I made my first brush pile because I needed something to do with the branches that littered my yard after an ice storm. I hadn’t read anything about proper construction, and I simply tossed the sticks into a loose pile. American tree sparrows and juncos adopted the new accommodations right away. Twice as many birds started patronizing my feeders. Whenever a sharp-shinned hawk visited the yard, the smaller birds swooshed like wind-blown leaves into the safety of the brush pile.

In early spring, I discovered a Bewick’s wren, rare where I live, in Iowa, singing from the top of the pile. The same day, a mate joined him. They nested nearby, and for several weeks I got to enjoy watching them as they searched through my heap of sticks for small invertebrates to take to their nest. I chalked that experience up to the brush pile. In summer, eastern phoebes perched every day on the highest sticks to watch for flying insects. In fall, the brush pile was where I spotted the first Lincoln’s sparrow of the season, a bird I’d never seen in my yard before.

In winter, the brush pile really came into its own. Each morning after a fresh snowfall, on its top and around its base I found the calligraphy left by small creatures in the snow, whose identity I could not guess. There were poignant stories. I followed a track that ended with the imprint of two large wings.

**Constructing a Super Brush Pile**

Any jumble of limbs will attract birds. But with a little attention to the details you can create a super brush pile that will sing out “home” to birds and will attract a wide variety of species. It’s a great side project for cleaning up the yard, cutting firewood, or clearing land for a new building. Here’s a recipe.

Cut or gather a collection of limbs and branches, preferably including some that are at least four to six inches in diameter. Arrange a few of your largest branches on the ground parallel to each other to form the first layer, with a few inches of space between them to create tunnels for larger birds. Just about any kind of wood will do, but making the bottom layer of rot-resistant wood such as locust or oak will prolong the life of the edifice.

For the second level, place your next largest branches at right angles to the first, log-cabin style. Continue criss-crossing branches to a height of three to five feet. Weave the wood together to make a stable construction. Your pile doesn’t have to be perfectly neat. Irregularity provides a matrix of internal spaces to shelter a variety of species.

As you get to the top, work in smaller material, and arrange it more densely. Finish your brush pile with a roof of evergreen branches, layered thickly to conceal the interior. In winter, snow will crust on top of the evergreens and form chambers inside as snug as an igloo. After the holiday season, you may enjoy piling on more boughs, from discarded Christmas trees, as extra insulation.

Aim to make your brush pile loose at the outside, so birds can get in easily and quickly. The center should be tighter, to provide small refuges where a bird can escape predators. In a suburban yard, you may only have room for a small pile, but birds will certainly use it. However, bigger is better. If you have the space for it, a pile ten feet square and six to ten feet tall is ideal. A well-built brush pile of this size should last for quite a few years. You can add to it over the seasons, as it slowly settles and shrinks. Eventually its interior spaces will fill or collapse, and it will be time to start a new pile.

**Where to Build Brush Piles**

If you have a garden, it makes sense to site your brush pile nearby, so that your flowers and vegetables will get maximum benefit from bug-munching birds. I like my brush pile where I can watch the action  
from the kitchen window. I don’t want to miss the monarch’s green and golden chrysalis turning transparent before the butterfly emerges. If brown thrashers come poking around my brush pile like they’re thinking about building a nest there, I want to know about it.

However, this sort of structure doesn’t fit in with everyone’s yard décor. If that’s the case, go ahead and tuck it into an out-of-the-way corner. Even a small, inconspicuous brush pile will increase the amount of bird life in your immediate environment.

If you have more space, or if you live in the country, you might even want to build more than one. Wildlife biologists recommend putting them close to woods, so that forest-dwelling birds can use them as cover when venturing out into fields. Birds also make heavy use of brush piles that are constructed near streams and wetlands.

**Community Acceptance**

If you live in town it’s wise to consult your municipal regulations before creating a brush pile in the backyard. Some cities have rules about where you can put a brush pile or how big it can be, or they may even forbid it entirely. Other communities don’t object unless they receive complaints. It may be politic to put your brush pile where it won’t offend your neighbor’s view.

A brush pile need not be unsightly. Plant morning glories, clematis, or other blooming vines by its side. They’ll clamber over it, drape it, and turn it into a hill of flowers. The wild birds who use it will be ambassadors for natural habitat in your neighborhood.

**Wild and Wonderful**

We long for a touch of the wild in our human-dominated spaces. We need its freshness and its mystery. Build a brush pile, and you’ll find you have the Discovery Channel in your own backyard. You’ll see birds you might have missed. You’ll witness events that will surprise you. And you’ll have the satisfaction of putting back a bit of the wild—back into your environment, back into your life.