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# Helping Wildlife During Heat Waves



By **Gemma Alexander**

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For humans and animals alike, surviving the winter used to be the challenge. In summertime, the living was easy. But with climate change, average temperatures are rising so much that animals' natural ranges are shifting and record-breaking [heat waves](#) are becoming life threatening. These days, even in summertime, wildlife gardening is less about attracting wildlife and more about helping them survive. Fortunately, a few easy steps in your garden can go a long way toward helping a variety of wildlife survive the summer's heat.

## Creature Comforts

Historically, [wildlife gardeners](#) have focused on creating habitat for birds and beneficial insects in [spring](#) and summer, while providing resources to help them [survive the winter](#). But as increasingly severe heat waves combine with [wildfire](#)

**smoke** and other summer stressors to cause **mass die-offs** of wildlife, our choices in the garden can be literally lifesaving for wild animals.

## Water

**Water** is always a critical component of wildlife gardening. Providing stagnant, dirty water is worse than no water at all, and letting water sources dry out forces animals that have come to rely on them to use precious energy to find new water. So be sure to keep all water sources topped up and clean. Use water elements that make noise, like fountains or **drip jugs**, to help animals find the water more easily. When temperatures soar, provide as many sources of water as possible. In addition to permanent features like ponds, fountains, and **bird baths**, set out shallow water basins at ground level for small mammals, reptiles, and amphibians. Don't put these containers too near bushes (to protect them from **feline predation**) and place objects strategically in the bowls. These can serve as perches for insects and escape routes for any creatures that fall in.



In times of intense heat, provide wildlife with multiple water sources. In addition to bird baths, set out shallow water basins at ground level for small mammals, reptiles, and amphibians.

## Cover

Wildlife always benefits from cover for safety, but shade becomes a health requirement in hot weather. Postpone pruning until the fall to maintain maximum leaf cover during the summer. **Mulch** beds thickly to keep the ground moist and cool and provide cover for insects. Leave holes and burrows intact – even if pests created them, other species could take refuge underground in hot weather. Be careful when cleaning up woody debris and even weed piles during hot weather, as small animals may be resting in their shade. Even shading paved areas like patios can benefit wildlife by slightly lowering the ambient temperature in your garden.

## Food

Although summer is usually a time of plentiful food for wildlife, during extreme heat usual food sources may ripen and die earlier than usual or fail to grow at all. Supplement lost food supplies by keeping your **wildlife-friendly plants** efficiently watered to produce berries and nectar-rich flowers, and birdfeeders stocked with **seasonally appropriate** food.



## Animal Aid

During a heat wave, the appearance of nocturnal animals in the daytime, birds sitting on the ground, or mammals lying still are all potential signs of dehydration and heat distress. You should not approach these animals. When animals are unable to flee, they are more likely to bite or scratch an approaching human. Although they may be dehydrated, they could also have a contagious disease.

[West Nile virus](#) and [rabies](#) can both have symptoms similar to the signs of heat stress. [Learn how to tell](#) what is normal for different species and whether intervention is likely to do [more harm than good](#). If you suspect a wild animal needs help, contact your [nearest wildlife rehabilitation center](#) for instructions.



Interfering with a wild animal often does more harm than good. If the animal seems injured or ill, don't disturb it. Instead, contact the nearest wildlife rehabilitation center.

## Do No Harm

British websites often suggest leaving out meaty snacks to feed hedgehogs and other cute critters, but North American gardeners will want to be more circumspect to avoid [wildlife conflict](#) with predatory species like bears and cougars. When animals are desperate, they may wander out of their normal range and into more [populated areas](#), which can lead to interactions that are even more dangerous than the heat.

Avoiding conflict is important in the wild, too. When hiking or camping, be sure to keep dogs leashed and on trails. [Loose dogs](#) can spread disease to some wild species. They also harass wild animals, creating further stress for animals that are already suffering. When animals are already stressed by environmental conditions, dogs can catch and kill them more easily. Bears are attracted to the easy food at campgrounds at the best of times; when food and water are scarce, [bear safe camping](#) practices become even more important.

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Extreme summers will continue to challenge humans and animals more and more as the climate changes. While animals do their best to survive, it falls to humans to learn how to [adapt to climate change](#). Besides finding ways to [keep ourselves cool](#), we owe it to wildlife to do the same for them.

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## [Summer Superfoods You Can Grow at Home](#)



By [Gemma Alexander](#)

Gemma Alexander has an M.S. in urban horticulture and a backyard filled with native plants. After working in a genetics laboratory and at a landfill, she now writes about the environment, the arts and family. See more of her writing [here](#).

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