

# The ambassadors

*An Ohio couple fixed up their yard for wildlife  
and now they can't stop talking about it*

“I’ll believe it when I see it,” thought Toni Stahl eight years ago after watching a video that told how she could attract more wildlife to her back yard.

Today, Toni and her husband, Marc Apfelstadt, believe it, and they’re sharing their story with others as they describe the dramatic transformation of their 50x100-foot lot in Dublin, Ohio.

With the help of before and after pictures, they tell audiences how a host of new birds began appearing in their yard two years after they tore out beds of annuals and much of the turf grass and replaced them with native plants and shrubs. They explain how they had to thumb through guide books to identify the more than 30 butterfly species that fluttered about the evolving habitat.

Toni and Marc share all this because as their yard hummed with new life, they blossomed into enthusiastic ambassadors for the program that got them started in the first place--the Certified Wildlife Habitat program sponsored by the National Wildlife Federation.

Not long after Toni and Marc completed an online training program, the National Wildlife Federation named them “Habitat Ambassador Hosts,” the highest rank that volunteer workers in the habitat program can achieve.

With a zeal that would put an Evangelist to shame, they’ve been spreading the word to home owners in Ohio and



*Toni Stahl and Marc Apfelstadt: Going the extra “yard” for wildlife.*

*Photo: Rollie Henkes*

beyond ever since. Last year Toni and Marc logged hundreds of volunteer hours for the Certified Wildlife Habitat program, giving speeches, manning displays at events, and preparing and distributing literature. They even admit to buttonholing people in supermarket checkout lines to extol the benefits of habitat. Marc’s lush photographs of butterflies, bees, birds and blooms accent their Power Point presentations and adorn



*Born again: Toni and Marc's yard before and after the conversion.*

the couple's comprehensive Website.

They also train other volunteers to assist at presentations and nature fairs.

"They're super stars. We wish we could clone them," says Melinda Hughes-Wert, manager of volunteer programs for the National Wildlife Federation, an organization that depends heavily on volunteers to carry out its objectives.

**Hooked.** In his other life Marc works in information technology and plays classical bassoon. Toni's background includes both jazz guitar and computers. They both pattered around in creeks and fields as youngsters, but they didn't expect to become so wrapped up in a movement to create wildlife habitat in small settings. "But wildlife and native plants certainly capture the imagination," Marc says. "We're also people persons," he adds. "We've made many new friends in the area because we take time to point out the interesting things in our yard as neighbors walk by."

Toni and Marc promote a concept validated by many studies that you don't need a large area to support wildlife so long as it's properly diversified. The National Wildlife Federation picked up on the studies, offering to certify back

yards and other sites that provide food and cover for wildlife. (More details page 15.)

Toni and Marc's yard, which now includes more than 100 species of native plants, goes well beyond the federation's requirements for certification.

**Record Keeping.** Marc says you don't need to go to these lengths to enjoy more songbirds and butterflies in your yard. But he believes that one thing they do would add to anyone's enjoyment, and that's their record-keeping system. Every year they record wildlife species they sight, along with plant species present that year.

Toni began making entries in an Excel spread sheet in 2001, the so-called "before" or base year. The spread sheet listed existing plants such as the bush honeysuckle (an invasive), cotoneaster, petunias and marigolds. Then she listed wildlife species observed. It was a short list: English sparrow, cardinal, mourning dove and robin for the birds; monarch and cabbage white butterflies; Virginia opossum and striped skunk.

The next year, the record shows they tore out the honeysuckle and the non-native annuals and added plants like

# Certified yards catch on

purple coneflower, butterfly weed, evening primrose and woodland sunflower---10 native plant species all told. Bird species sighted went up to nine that year; butterfly species stood at three.

Dramatic changes occurred in 2003. By now, native plant species totaled 59, including understory shrubs such as serviceberry, gray dogwood and spicebush. They created a forest edge with plants at varied heights. Bird species shot up to 30, while butterfly species increased to 16.

In 2006 their yard had 113 native plant species. That year they recorded 37 bird species and 33 butterfly species, along with nine mammalian species. By now their yard had become a stopover for migrants such as Swainson's thrush, ovenbird, rose-breasted grosbeak, common nighthawk, hummingbirds and dozens of monarch butterflies on their way to Mexico in the fall.

Toni summarized their observations in a scholarly "white paper" research report last year, which has attracted the attention of ecologists. Her findings show a very strong correlation between plant diversity and wildlife populations over time.

**Powered by native plants.** "Our records confirm that it's not the size of the area that's so important, but rather it's the mix and diversity of plant species," Toni says. "Our records also show the importance of native plants, maintained without chemical pesticides and fertilizers. Wildlife can't exist without native plants." (The table below lists a partial summary of results).

"I think if other home owners recorded similar observations, it would add tremendously to our understanding of how wildlife interacts with landscaping practices," Toni adds.

To that end, Toni and Marc have posted a record-keeping guide on their Website based on their system. (See "what is the impact?" tab.) If many home owners used such a standardized system, it could generate a huge database with some very useful comparisons, Toni believes.

"Whatever your system," Marc says, "keeping written records, along with shooting photos and videos, will help you connect with the natural world in your yard and appreciate it more." ~Rollie Henkes

**Toni Stahl and Marc Apfelstadt • 2948 Royalwood Drive, Dublin, OH 43017 • GeekGuyA1@yahoo.com • <http://home.columbus.rr.com/nwfbackyardohio>**

## Charting change in Toni and Marc's yard

Species Count	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Native Plants	3	10	59	79	94	113
Birds	4	9	30	31	33	37
Butterflies	2	3	16	18	32	33
Other Insects	13	16	35	39	44	51
Mammals	2	4	8	8	9	9

Chart: "Residential Land Stewardship: Impact on Biodiversity" by Toni Stahl

The National Wildlife Federation's Certified Wildlife Habitat program goes back to 1973, but interest has boomed in recent years, according to Roxanne Paul, the program's coordinator. Certified habitats went from about 68,000 in late 2003 to more than 97,000 last year, she says.

Mounting losses of green spaces could explain the new interest. "People become concerned when they see a woodland or a field down the street paved over," Paul says. "It makes them open to the idea of replacing lost habitat in their own yards."

The federation's program rides on studies showing that wildlife can thrive in remarkably small spaces, so long as the spaces provide adequate diversity. The program encourages people to plant wildlife friendly flowers and shrubs in spaces as small as apartment roof gardens.



Applicants fill out a questionnaire, online or through the mail, checking off things they've done to benefit wildlife. These include establishing plants that provide wildlife food such as fruit, nectar and seeds, along with a water source and cover to provide shelter and places to raise their young.

The program doesn't require that participants use only native species. However, restoring native plants is one of the core practices that leads to certification, Paul says. Other practices under the heading of "sustainable gardening" include reducing lawn areas and eliminating chemical pesticides and fertilizers.

Qualified sites of any size are accepted, from apartment gardens to acres. Churches, school and business properties have been certified under the program.

The NWF does charge \$15 for the certificate, suitable for framing. That also pays for a year's subscription to National Wildlife magazine and membership in the National Wildlife Federation. The metal sign is \$25.

**For more information • [www.nwf.org/bwh](http://www.nwf.org/bwh) • 800-822-9919**

*To those who can discriminate vegetation only in broad categories--- tree, vine, underbrush---a roadside is no more than a green blur. Learn sumac and the scene sharpens. Learn two dozen roadside species, and what had been carpeting resolves into a tapestry. To name something is to know it, to make it leap to awareness. ~Sara Stein*