

TRAILS AS HABITATS

The news about the state of the natural world is grim. Over 8,500 species in North America are at risk of extinction. 95% of the United States has been logged, tilled, drained, grazed, paved or otherwise developed¹. Climate change is upon us. Many people do not feel any connection to the natural world. Habitat fragmentation makes even large plant and animal populations small and isolated from each other, which increases the risk for local extinctions.

There is good news. Trails can provide vital biological corridors that enable species to move between habitats. Additionally, with thoughtful management, trails become vital habitats, especially in urban and suburban areas.

Once you have designed and constructed a sustainable trail, you can create quality habitat utilizing the following steps:

1. Remove invasive plant species. Invasive plants truly limit an ecosystem's ability to function. If you need help determining which plants along the trail are invasive, go to <http://nc-ipc.weebly.com/nc-invasive-plants.html>. This is the website for the NC Invasive Plant Council and is an excellent resource. You will notice that some of the worst invasives are still being sold in nurseries.
2. Plant keystone species. Research has shown that a few genera of native plants undergird most local ecosystems. These species include native oaks, cherries, willows, goldenrods and asters. To get a specific list for your area, consult the National Wildlife Federation's Native Plant Finder at <https://www.nwf.org/NativePlantFinder>.
3. Plant for specialist pollinators. While the Monarch butterfly is probably the best known specialist pollinator, many bees, butterflies and other native insects pollinate only one plant, or plant group. North Carolina Cooperative Extension offers resources for planting for specialist pollinators at <https://growingsmallfarms.ces.ncsu.edu/growingsmallfarms-pollinatorconservation/>.
4. Plant more plants. Be generous with your plantings and be sure to consider increasing the diversity of your plants, along with the abundance. Think about vertical layers when planning your plantings.
5. Don't use turfgrass to edge your trail. Use a native groundcover and reduce your maintenance—and make the edge habitat far more inviting for a host of species.



Resources:

Tallamy, Douglas. *Nature's Best Hope*. Timber Press, Portland, OR, 2019

¹ *Nature's Best Hope* by Douglas Tallamy

Please contact the state trails program if you have any questions about state trails.



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