

How to Help

Eastern Towhees



Large, secretive black, white, and rust-colored sparrows, Eastern Towhees flourish in brushy habitats across the Eastern United States. Towhees feed on the ground under bushes and shrubs, and can be helped by protecting brushy fields and forest understory from over browsing by deer and by planting additional patches of native shrubs as nesting, foraging, and roosting habitat.

What Eastern Towhees Need

Food: Eastern Towhees are omnivorous, eating a wide range of seeds, fruits, and especially insects, spiders, and sowbugs found in leaf litter under bushes and shrubs. Usually found in the middle of shrubby patches, they only rarely venture out from beneath low overhanging shade or cover. They consume a wide variety of weed seeds including ragweed, smartweed, and native grasses, and also feed on acorns and fruit, including blackberries, blueberries, elderberries.

Nesting: Eastern Towhees nest in habitat with dense low trees and shrubs and thick leaf litter, including overgrown fields and forests with a thick understory. They place their nests on the ground at the base of grass or a shrub, or in low branches of bushes, briars, or shrubs.

Shelter: They roost and sleep 9 to 15 feet high in thick vegetation.

Other: Towhees may use smaller patches of brush during winter or migration. They will drink and bathe in birdbaths, small ponds, or water drips in their brushy habitat. Since they nest and feed close to the ground, towhees are especially susceptible to attack by roaming house cats. Towhees nesting near homes may collide with picture windows.

How You Can Help

- Plant or maintain 20 x 20 foot patches of native shrubs and bushes including fruiting mulberries, viburnums, bayberries, and blueberries, briars, or wild grapes.
- Allow leaves to accumulate under bushes to provide foraging opportunities for towhees.
- Towhees will come to commercial bird seed including millet and sunflower seeds spread on the ground or low platform feeder below bushes or shrubs.
- Avoid use of pesticides that kill insects that towhees eat, and herbicides that destroy their brushy habitat and weedy plant foods.
- Plant or maintain patches of native shrubs and bushes.
- Allow tangles of briars (brambles) or wild grapes to take over field edges or forest clearings.
- Consider methods of deer control if shrubby habitats are overbrowsed by deer.
- Refrain from pruning large patches of shrubs in yard to provide roosting sites.
- Provide a birdbath, small pond, or water drip near bushes where towhees forage. Keep water clean, fresh, and free of mosquito larvae.
- Keep pet cats indoors to keep them safe from outside hazards and to protect native birds. Remove feral cats from neighborhood.
- Screen windows or make them visible so towhees can avoid colliding with them (www.audubonathome.org/SafeWindows.html).