

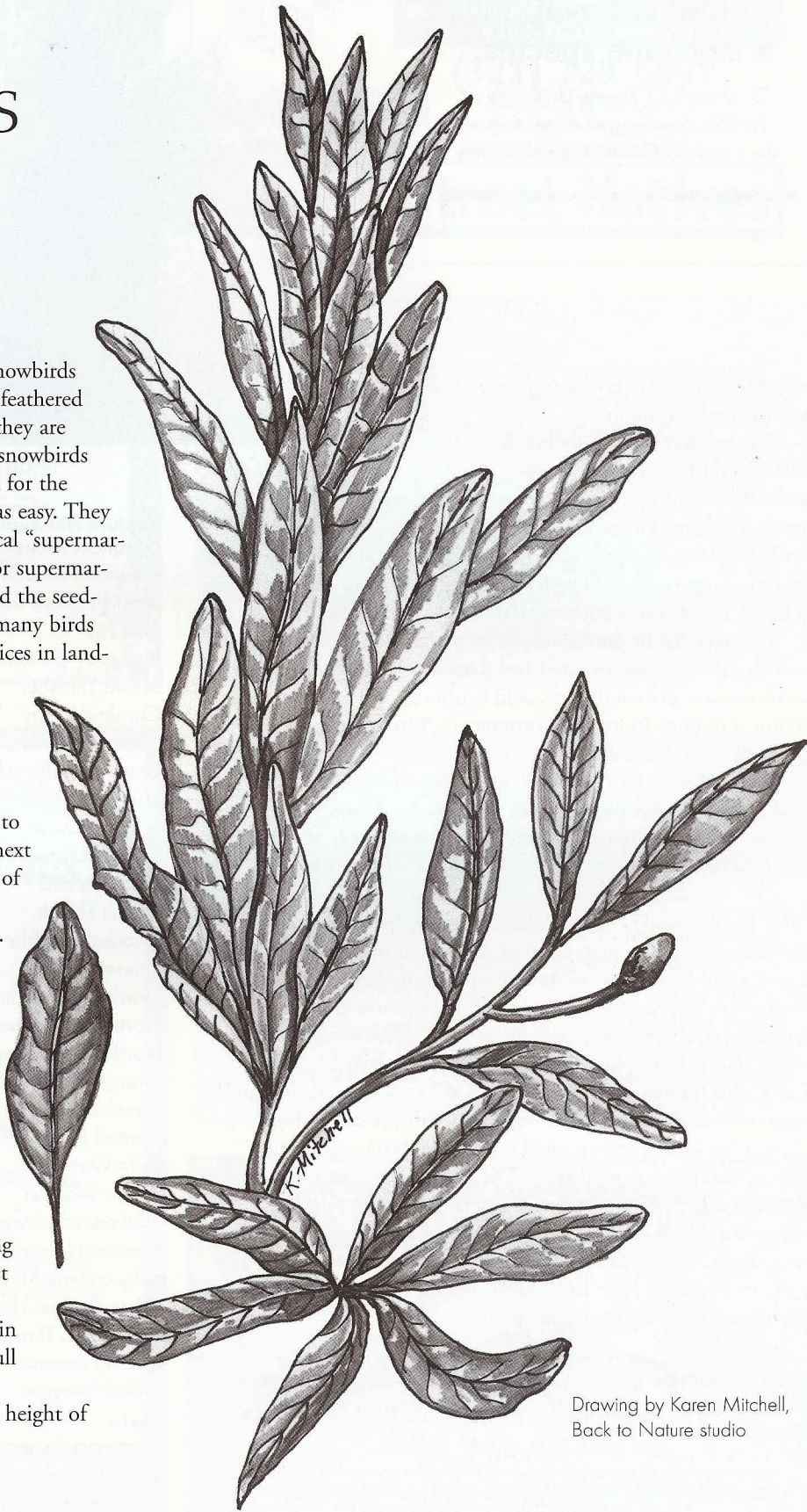
Wax Myrtle, a Snowbird's Friend

BY RICHARD POOLE

When the weather turns cold up north, human snowbirds are found everywhere in Florida. The presence of feathered snowbirds in Florida may not be as obvious, but they are here, looking for food and shelter. When human snowbirds want food, no problem—hop in the car and head for the supermarket. For feathered snowbirds, life is not as easy. They frequently fly to Florida only to find their historical “supermarket” gone (perhaps converted to a human house or supermarket). Some caring people fill feeders with seed, and the seed-eaters of the bird world enjoy a meal. However, many birds survive on berries and insects, not seeds. Our choices in landscaping can be critically important to these birds.

In 1998, a banding station monitoring winter birds was established in Rock Springs Run State Reserve Park, north of Orlando, Florida. Nets are used to capture birds for banding and release. Vegetation around the nets varies from scrub oak to palmetto and blackberry thickets. Some nets are next to wax myrtles (*Myrica cerifera*). The capture rate of birds in nets near wax myrtles is over three times the capture rate for nets not near the wax myrtles. Some interesting captures include: an ovenbird (*Seiurus aurocapillus*) was caught nine times in the same net from October 19, 1999 to February 3, 2001; a pair of swamp sparrows (*Melospiza georgiana*) caught December 17, 2000 were caught almost exactly one year later (December 13, 2001); an orange-crowned warbler (*Vermivora celata*) caught in January 13, 1999 was caught again in December 15, 2001. Tree Swallows (*Tachycineta bicolor*) also use wax myrtles to supplement their insect diet. Wintering flocks will descend on a bush and consume almost all the berries.

The wax myrtle is an evergreen tree common in moist sandy soil, but it will grow in dry soils in full sun or partial shade. The trees grow from south Georgia to south Florida. Although it can reach a height of



Drawing by Karen Mitchell, Back to Nature studio

“Wax myrtles are an important factor for bird survival... a keystone species.”

Dr. Douglas J. Levey, University of Florida, speaking at a meeting of the Georgia Ornithological Society



thirty feet, it responds well to pruning and suckers readily.

Wax myrtles provide shelter as well as food for a variety of animals. Persistent berries, an excellent food source for wildlife, ripen in winter on female plants. The small gray berries usually grow below the leaves along the stem and have an aromatic scent. The fruit, coated in wax, is used for candle making. Leaves add a bayberry flavor to many meals.

The trees can be grown as specimen plants or used as a screen or hedge that can be trimmed and shaped. Wax myrtle's adaptability to wet and dry conditions, cold hardiness, and salt tolerance permit it to grow in many environments. Wax Myrtles are relatively free of insects and diseases.*

If you want to be a friend of our feathered snowbirds, provide food and shelter for them—plant wax myrtle. If your yard is full, remove any non-native hedge and replace it with a Real Florida friend, wax myrtle.

*[Ed] Until now. The exotic lobate lac scale, “potentially one of the most devastating pests of trees and shrubs in Florida's history,” according to U.S. Dept. of Agriculture entomologist Bob Pemberton, targets wax myrtle as well as buttonwood, cocoplum, firebush, pond apple, strangler fig, red bay, white mangroves, wild coffee, and willow (plus exotic edibles and ornamentals). First found on a hibiscus in Davie in 1999, the scale's population and impact has exploded over the last ten months, infesting Big Cypress National Preserve, the Loxahatchee National Wildlife Refuge, and other natural areas. The scale can be controlled with a chemical drench of *Imidacloprid*, at a cost of about \$40 per tree, an approach both undesirable and unaffordable. Biocontrols are being studied. The scale undoubtedly entered the country on exotic plants imported from India or Sri Lanka, its native home. Homeland Security, where are you?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Richard Poole's interest in birds and plants began when he was a Boy Scout in Memphis, Tennessee. After earning a Ph.D. in Plant Physiology from the University of Florida, he worked with the indoor foliage industry for thirty years. Richard served as president of the Orange Audubon Society and is a member of the Tarflower Chapter of FNPS. We are grateful to Richard for helping us start this new series of articles on the benefits of landscaping with Real Florida plants!

Capture Net Analysis

COMMON NAME	SPECIES	# CAUGHT
American Redstart	<i>Setophaga ruticilla</i>	4
Black-throated Blue Warbler	<i>Dendroica caerulescens</i>	3
Blue Jay	<i>Cyanocitta cristata</i>	1
Blue-gray Gnatcatcher	<i>Poliottila caerulea</i>	2
Brown Thrasher	<i>Toxostoma rufum</i>	3
Carolina Wren	<i>Thryothorus ludovicianus</i>	8
Chipping Sparrow	<i>Spizella passerina</i>	2
Common Yellowthroat	<i>Geothlypis trichas</i>	110
Eastern Phoebe	<i>Sayornis phoebe</i>	5
Eastern Towhee	<i>Pipilo erythrophthalmus</i>	7
Field Sparrow	<i>Spizella pusilla</i>	1
Gray Catbird	<i>Dumetella carolinensis</i>	256
Hermit Thrush	<i>Catharus guttatus</i>	3
Hooded Warbler	<i>Wilsonia citrina</i>	2
House Wren	<i>Troglodytes aedon</i>	43
Northern Waterthrush	<i>Seiurus noveboracensis</i>	3
Northern Cardinal	<i>Cardinalis cardinalis</i>	16
Northern Mockingbird	<i>Mimus polyglottos</i>	1
Orange-crowned Warbler	<i>Vermivora celata</i>	6
Ovenbird	<i>Seiurus aurocapillus</i>	12
Painted Bunting	<i>Passerina ciris</i>	2
Palm Warbler	<i>Dendroica palmarum</i>	15
Prairie Warbler	<i>Dendroica discolor</i>	15
Prothonotary Warbler	<i>Protonotaria citrea</i>	1
Red-eyed Vireo	<i>Vireo olivaceus</i>	1
Ruby-crowned Kinglet	<i>Regulus calendula</i>	25
Sharp-shinned Hawk	<i>Accipiter striatus</i>	1
Swainson's Thrush	<i>Catharus ustulatus</i>	2
Swamp Sparrow	<i>Melospiza georgiana</i>	67
Tufted Titmouse	<i>Baeolophus bicolor</i>	3
Veery	<i>Catharus fuscescens</i>	1
White-eyed Vireo	<i>Vireo griseus</i>	36
Wood Thrush	<i>Hylocichla mustelina</i>	1
Worm-eating Warbler	<i>Helmitheros vermivora</i>	1
Yellow-rumped Warbler	<i>Dendroica coronata</i>	308