THE DISTANT VIEW from Kelly Brenner’s Seattle living room was enviable, a testament to the engineering marvels of modern human habitat.

But much closer to home were sights even more spectacular than the Space Needle rising hundreds of feet in front of the Olympic Mountains. Against the backdrop of one of America’s prettiest cities, ladybugs quietly made their way into the world, growing from eggs to adulthood in the small space just outside the sliding door. Hummingbirds sipped from potted lavender, and bees, butterflies and hoverflies feasted on native flowers such as sea thrift, nodding onion and red-flowering currant.

“I got so well-acquainted with every little plant and every little nook and cranny that I got to experience really intimately the life cycle,” says Brenner, the blogger behind Metropolitan Field Guide (metrofieldguide.com). She even grew some plants from seed on her sixth-story apartment balcony. “It was very rewarding watching the seed grow and become a flower, and then the bee came to see it.”

What was magical to Brenner was life-sustaining to the species who ate and bred in the mini-habitat. Creatures such as caterpillars, crows and scrub jays took advantage of the gourmet feast offered by native plants and herbs, the watering hole made from a shallow container filled with rocks for perching and the shelter provided by clumping plants. The space even included a spice-rack-turned-insect-hotel filled with natural materials like twigs and seedpods.

As the number of Americans living in urban areas has grown—an estimated eight out of every 10—so has the need to make room for our fellow species. According to the global 2005 Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, we’re already degrading or using unsustainably 60 percent of the planet’s ecosystem services that benefit humans. That’s not good news for wildlife either, as fragmentation and contamination of habitat diminishes biodiversity and threatens further extinctions.

Fortunately, the opportunities to make a difference are limitless, whether you have a patio, balcony, or like urban farmer Annie Novak, rooftops. Novak’s experiences are a testament to the power of adding plants to all levels of the concrete jungle: She’s spotted the same migrating bird species in vastly different gardens, from a site rising
more than 30 stories above the city to the
ground-level New York Botanical Garden
where she works.

Connecting these green archipelagos
into contiguous habitat supports overwin­
tering animals as well. People often empha­
size the importance of such efforts in
rainforests and other distant places, says
Novak, but nature needs our help in down­
town New York, too. “We live in an eco­
system that has lots and lots of wildlife.”

While conventional small-space gar­
dening advice is easy to find, making a
mini-habitat requires a slightly different
approach. Here’s how to channel other spe­
cies’ perspectives when creating pocket
gardens for wildlife.

GAIN A SENSE OF PLACE. Research the
fauna and wildlife-friendly flora in your
community, recommends Novak, by
observing animals and their plant prefer­
ces at parks and gardens. Learn what’s
grown naturally in your region in the past.
If you see small gardens that attract ani­
mals, including insects, find out the names
of the plants and consider adding more.
Creating strength in numbers enhances
habitat corridors and draws pollinators,
who are attracted to mass plantings.

“It’s about a narrative,” says Novak. “It’s
not like you hang up a Christmas tree and
it’s Christmas. It’s not a cookie-cutter kind
of project. You really have to think about
who you want to attract, when are they
in your area, what do they like to eat.”

PLANT NATURAL FOOD FOR WILDLIFE.
If squirrels, pigeons and other generalist
species proliferate in your neighborhood,
be prepared to welcome them. “I try and
emphasize that connectedness of the space,”
says Novak, “because otherwise people get
let down if they put up a hummingbird
feeder and ... get squirrels—because squir­
rels like sugar water, too.”

Just because the habitat is man-made
doesn’t mean the food has to be. Instead of
hanging feeders, plant native species that
provide berries, seeds, pollen, nectar and
foliage for wildlife. Include spring-, summer-
and fall-flowering plants that
offer a succession of blooms; several species
with red trumpet-shaped flowers can sus­
tain hummingbirds throughout the season.
Make the most of your space with multi­
purpose plants; Novak likes sunflowers,
which feed pollinators while in bloom and
birds after going to seed.

WHAT WOULD NATURE DO? Urban envi­
ronments can swing more quickly among
extremes of heat, drought and flash
flooding. Look to the natural world for
clues about what will thrive. “While you’re
thinking about wildlife, you’re also thinking
about what the plant can handle and
finding the right plants for the right spot so
you can do as little maintenance as pos­
sible,” says Anna Fialkoff, a horticulturist at
the New England Wild Flower Society.

If your balcony is exposed to sun and
high winds, choose plants that grow on
ridge tops or on the coast, she suggests.
Consider moisture needs, and avoid
planting drought-tolerant plants with ones
that like to keep their feet wet. Use con­
trasting microclimates as opportunities to
experiment. Situated between two pillars,
Brenner’s balcony provided both sun and
shade, enabling her to shift plants around.

GIVE THEM SHELTER. Animals visiting
your freshly planted balcony or patio bring
along with them evolutionary behaviors
developed over many millennia. A mama
bird who claims a hanging pot for her nest
may preclude you from watering your plant
for a while, but you’ll gain far more in
return: a close-up view of nature at work
and a chance to help your wild friends.

Watch carefully for such comings-and
ings so you don’t inadvertently remove,
flood or otherwise destroy little lives in the
making.

Add vines, bushes, small trees and
grasses that offer cover and nesting areas,
planting straight species rather than cul­
tvars when possible. While some cultivars
bred for compactness can be useful, some
may have lost nutritional value for wildlife
in the process, Fialkoff notes.

BE ADAPTABLE. Small adjustments to
existing structures can accommodate the
needs of both human and wild neighbors.
Brenner laughs at the memory of seeing
terra-cotta pots, even as heavy as they were,
would blow off the balcony. But she took
care to prevent dousing the people down­
stairs with water, covering the metal slats of
her balcony floor with wood decking atop
an outdoor rug.

In spite of its challenges, Brenner still
misses her mini-habitat even after relo­
cating to a single-family home. Small spaces
have benefits (“almost no weeding!” she
says) and their own kind of magic—a
chance to connect with nature in places
that, in many cases, previously had none.
Through her continued outreach, she hopes
to engage more city dwellers in the biodi­
versity right outside their doors.

Maybe they’ll even be inspired to help.
“If everybody had at least two or three con­
tainers of plants, that could be ... equivalent
to a meadow for pollinators,” Brenner says.
“If all the buildings through the whole city
did that, you couldn’t even imagine.”

+ GET REGION-SPECIFIC RESOURCES
on creating pocket wildlife habitats at
humanesociety.org/mini-habitat.

Follow Nancy Lawson
on her blog at
humanegardener.com
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