

A Guide to Bird Feeding

Adopting a bird feeding program on your property provides an opportunity to enhance habitat for wildlife and to view birds first hand. The actual process of attracting birds can be quite simple and very satisfying. Anyone with even a small piece of land, whether in a rural, suburban, or urban setting, can attract and feed birds with success.

How do birds spend the winter?

During colder winter months when natural food sources such as insects, berries, nuts, and seeds become scarce, birds readily seek reliable food sources to supplement their wild diet. Birds spend their time in one particular area and travel throughout this territory searching for food all day. Your goal is to have your property on their list of daily stops.



Providing bird feeders can greatly enhance the wildlife habitat value of your property.

What do birds eat?

Just like people, birds have food preferences. For example, hummingbirds sip nectar, wrens eat insects, owls prefer rodents, and finches like seeds. Birds that prefer to eat insects, nectar, and fruit generally migrate to the southern United States and Central and South America during the winter. In these warmer climates, they find the food they need to survive.

Most of the birds you will attract to your feeder eat seeds as a major part of their diet. Seeds provide protein and fat that give birds energy and help them stay warm. The beaks of seed-eating birds are especially designed for crushing hard shells. You will notice that many birds at your feeder, such as finches, cardinals, and grosbeaks, have fat, large beaks.

How do we attract birds to our property?

The essentials of bird feeding are quite simple. You will achieve success by providing their basic requirements for food, cover, and water.

HELPFUL WEB SITE

Project FeederWatch, administered
by The Cornell Lab of Ornithology:
www.birds.cornell.edu/pfw/

Getting Started

A feeding station can help local birds survive through the winter when food sources are more scarce. The best time to begin the project is mid-autumn when birds are establishing their winter feeding territories; however, feeders can be placed at any time of year and will likely draw a variety of birds within a few days of placement.

1. Choose a Feeder Location.

It is best to choose a location where you will be able to view the birds easily from inside. If possible, place your feeder near trees or shrubs. Birds will use these to perch and seek protection from adverse weather and predators. Evergreen trees and shrubs are ideal, but even deciduous types may be used for cover. If there are no trees or shrubs nearby, you can make a brush pile of branches and twigs to provide cover for birds near the feeder.

2. Select the Correct Feeder.

You can either buy or construct feeders for your station. There are several types of feeders from which to choose and each has distinct advantages.

- A hanging tube feeder is easy to fill and food is displayed clearly to birds. Metal reinforced perches help prevent squirrels from monopolizing hanging feeders.
- House-style feeders are attractive and large models hold a lot of seed. To deter squirrels, use a baffle on the pole and place the feeder away from branches.
- A ground feeder will attract cardinals, mourning doves, dark-eyed juncos, white crowned sparrows, and other birds that prefer to feed on the ground. You can use an open tray-type feeder or scatter seed directly on the ground.
- Suet feeders provide high-energy fat for birds, including woodpeckers, nuthatches, chickadees, and titmice. Suet is low maintenance, lasts a long time, and can be hung from onion bags or placed in a wire cage.



House Finches collect at feeders or perch high in nearby trees. When they're not at feeders, they feed on the ground, on weed stalks, or in trees.

In addition, make sure the feeders you choose are safe. Provide feeders without sharp points or edges that may scratch or cut a bird, allowing bacteria and viruses to enter.

3. Provide Quality Seed.

There are a variety of seed mixes available and many stores sell unmixed seeds in bulk. When buying seed, select seeds that birds you wish to attract prefer. We recommend:

- Sunflower seed - the top choice among most birds
- Cracked corn – a good choice for ground-feeding birds
- Niger (thistle) – great for finches
- Safflower – eaten by cardinals, blue jays, and mourning doves
- Peanuts – attracts woodpeckers and brown creepers

Be sure to read the ingredients on seed mixes, especially bargain brands. These usually contain “filler” seeds that are generally not eaten. Avoid mixes with milo, red millet, flax, oats, rice, and wheat. You can observe the individual food preferences of different birds at your feeder by putting different types of seed in each feeder and observing which type is eaten first and by what birds.

4. Add Water.

By providing a clean, open water source at your feeding station, you will attract more birds. Birds use water for drinking and bathing, and prefer shallow water on or near the ground. A bird bath, barrel, or clay flower pot dish work well. Birds are especially attracted to the sound of moving or dripping water.

5. Give Them Space.

Avoid crowding by providing ample feeder space. If birds have to jostle each other to reach the food, they are too crowded.

6. Maintain Your Feeder and Prevent Disease.

You should be aware that birds can contract and spread diseases while eating at bird feeders. Some visible disease symptoms can include: wart-like growths, swollen throats or faces, and runny or crusted eyes. There are several steps you can take to help maintain your feeder and minimize disease problems.

- Keep the feeder area clean of waste food and droppings.
- Clean and disinfect feeders once or twice a month. Use a solution of one part liquid chlorine household bleach in nine parts of tepid water. Immerse the feeder for two or three minutes and then allow it to air dry.
- Discard any food that smells musty, feels or appears wet, looks moldy, or has fungus growing on it.
- Store food in plastic containers or garbage cans with lids. This will prevent contamination.
- Be sure to act early. Don't wait to act until you see sick or dead birds.

7. Identify and Record the Birds You See. There are many useful bird books, charts, and posters available to help you identify birds. Check references in your library. *Peterson*, *Audubon*, *Stokes*, and *Golden Field Guides* are all recommended. Record what birds you see, when you see them, what they were eating, and what the weather conditions were like. Short and long-term trends in songbird populations have been established using data from backyard bird watches.

OTHER BIRD FEEDING OPTIONS

- Hang apples and oranges for tanagers and orioles.
- Hang an opened coconut. The birds will eat the coconut meat and then you can fill the coconut with a melted suet mixture and hang it.
- Fill the bottom of a bluebird box with dried berries (raisins, cranberries, apricots).



Fresh fruit, berries, and mealworms can also provide valuable nutrients. Be sure to check fresh food regularly to ensure it hasn't started to go bad.