

Feeding Birds in Your Yard – The Basics

A Wisconsin Society for Ornithology Publicity Committee Fact Sheet
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You can join the millions of people who attract birds to their yards by offering a wide choice of **foods that are high in fat and protein** at a variety of feeders for most “backyard” birds throughout the year, and **nectar** for hummingbirds in the summer. Keep in mind that bird feeders supplement the natural food provided by plants, and don’t worry that birds will have trouble surviving if you stop feeding for some reason. No research has shown that birds will starve if feeding is stopped during normal weather.

Birds need **water** for drinking and bathing. Increase your chances of attracting birds by providing water in a birdbath, a small pond, a recirculating waterfall or a shallow dish.

Choosing feeders

Various types of feeders are available to accommodate specific types of birds and their diets. Choose more than one to help attract more species and avoid feeder congestion.

1. **Ground feeders** – simple screen-bottomed trays that sit several inches off the ground to help keep seeds and bird droppings from coming in contact with each other. Doves, juncos, sparrows, goldfinches and cardinals are likely to visit them.
2. **Sunflower-seed tube feeders** – hanging tubes with ports and perches. If you are going to put out just one feeder, this is your best choice. Be sure to select a model with metal ports around the seed dispensers to protect them from nibbling squirrels and House Sparrows. The visitors are likely to include woodpeckers, chickadees, titmice, nuthatches, goldfinches, siskins and Purple and House Finches.
3. **Hopper feeders** – automatic-dispensing units with perches or a platform. They will draw the species that tube feeders attract, along with larger birds like doves, jays, grackles and cardinals.
4. **Thistle (nyjer) feeders** – designed to dispense thistle seed. These feeders, which make the seed available only to small-beaked finches such as goldfinches, redpolls and Pine Siskins, can be tubes with tiny holes or mesh bags.
5. **Suet feeders** – cage feeders designed to hold a cake of suet. You can also hang suet chunks in a mesh onion bag. Suet is popular with titmice, chickadees, nuthatches and woodpeckers.

Locating feeders

When you choose locations for your feeders, think about things like reducing competition among feeding birds and accommodating different feeding styles, as well as reducing hazards to the birds. Hanging feeders should be at least five feet off the ground.

1. **Locate feeders at different levels** – to avoid crowding and attract the greatest variety of species, provide table-like feeders for ground-feeding birds, hopper or tube feeders for shrub and treetop feeders, and suet feeders.
2. **Locate feeders so they’re convenient to refill.**
3. **Protect birds from window collisions** – place feeders within three feet of windows or at least 10 yards from them. Males and opaque decorations outside windows can help prevent bird strikes, or attach fruit tree netting outside windows to deflect birds from the glass.
4. **Protect birds from predators** – be sure your feeders are near natural cover such as trees and shrubs or loosely stacked brush piles to provide refuge for birds while they wait their turn to feed. Don’t place feeders too close to cover, however, as nearby branches can provide good jump-off points for squirrels that may be eyeing the seeds and cats that may be eyeing the birds. A distance of about ten feet seems to be a good compromise.

Selecting seeds

Birds that visit your feeders have very specific preferences, and the species you attract are determined primarily by the seeds you offer. Check the composition of packaged birdseed mixtures – the common cereal grains such as milo, wheat and oats all rate significantly below black, oil-type sunflower seed and white millet in attracting birds. Rather than buying mixes, you may want to spend your money

Uninvited guests

Cats. Keep them indoors, and encourage your neighbors to do the same. Cats kill hundreds of millions of birds annually in the United States, often pouncing on ground-feeding birds and those dazed by window collisions. Responsible and caring cat owners keep their cats indoors, where they are also safer from traffic, disease and fights with other animals.

Squirrels are a notorious nuisance for birds and the people trying to feed them. They monopolize seed supplies, frighten birds and damage feeders. Follow these steps to spend less time chasing these persistent pests and more time birding in your yard.

1. **Exclude them** – place bird feeders on a pole in an open area, at least five feet off the ground and about ten feet from nearby trees; keep in mind that squirrels can jump as far as six feet.
2. **Baffle them** – attach a baffle to the feeder pole. You can buy special squirrel baffles, or you can attach an inverted sheet metal cone at least 18 inches in diameter. PVC pipe or stovepipe at least 6 inches in diameter and 18 inches long works as well. If a feeder is suspended from a horizontal wire, old record albums, CDs or plastic soda bottles threaded onto the wire can keep squirrels from tightrope-walking over to it.
3. **Distract them** – provide them with their own feeders, stocked with foods that are especially attractive to them (corn, nuts, seeds, etc.) and located far from bird feeders to avoid their crossing over.

In addition, **chipmunks, rats and mice** can become a problem where there’s seed spillage under feeders. Reduce this problem by avoiding mixed birdseed that causes the birds to toss out seeds they don’t want to get at those they do.

Hawks (usually Sharp-shinned Hawks, Cooper’s Hawks or American Kestrels) may kill birds at your feeders. Such predation is a perfectly natural event, and it should not be viewed as a disaster. Just as songbirds are attracted to the concentration of food at your feeders, so raptors are attracted to the concentration of their prey there. Be sure your birds have some shrubby escape cover reasonably near feeders. If this predation bothers you, take down your feeders for a few days to encourage the hawk to move on. All raptors are protected by law, so don’t put out poisons or try to trap them.

more effectively by buying only black, oil-type sunflower seed and white millet separately in bulk. For bulk suppliers, check the Yellow Pages under Food Dealers or Bird Supplies.

1. **Sunflower seed** – black-oil seed is the preferred seed of many small feeder birds. Striped sunflower seed is also readily eaten, especially by large-beaked birds. Hulled sunflower seed is consumed by the greatest variety of birds: it attracts jays, woodpeckers, finches, goldfinches, cardinals, chickadees, titmice and nuthatches.
2. **Millet** – white millet is the favorite food of most small-beaked ground-feeding birds. Millet attracts doves, juncos and sparrows.
3. **Cracked corn** – medium cracked corn is about as popular with ground-feeding birds as millet, but it is vulnerable to rot, since the interior of the kernel readily soaks up moisture. Feed small amounts, mixed with millet, on feeding tables or from water-resistant hopper feeders. Avoid fine cracked corn, since it quickly turns to mush; coarse cracked corn is too large for small-beaked birds. Cracked corn attracts pheasants, doves, crows, jays, sparrows and juncos.
4. **Milo, wheat, oats** – agricultural products that are frequently mixed into low-priced birdseed blends. Most birds discard them in favor of other food, which leaves them to accumulate under feeders where they may attract rodents.
5. **Thistle (nyjer)** – a preferred food of goldfinches and House Finches. Do not confuse it with prickly thistle, a pink-flowered weed used by goldfinches to line their nests.
6. **Suet (beef fat)** – attract insect-eating birds such as woodpeckers, chickadees, nuthatches and titmice. Unprocessed suet can be purchased from a butcher. Suet can also be purchased as processed cakes that include seeds, berries and other ingredients. Some people make their own suet mix by grinding the suet and adding seeds, then packing the mixture into the crevices of large pine cones. Do not put out suet when temperatures rise into the 80-degree range as it can turn rancid; also, dripping fat can damage natural waterproofing on bird feathers. Peanut butter “pudding” (recipe at right) is a good substitute for suet in the summer.
7. **Peanuts** – whole and crushed peanuts attract woodpeckers, jays, chickadees, titmice, nuthatches and starlings. Many bird species will come for peanut hearts. Provide peanuts in tube-shaped, metal mesh feeders.
8. **Fruit** – attract fruit specialists such as robins, waxwings and bluebirds by soaking raisins and currants in water overnight, then placing them on a table feeder. You can also purchase blends with a dried fruit mixture. To attract orioles and tanagers, offer grape jelly, skewer halved oranges onto a spike near other feeders, or provide nectar feeders.

Peanut butter “pudding.” Mix one part peanut butter with five parts corn meal and stuff the mixture into holes drilled in a hanging log or into the crevices of a large pinecone.

Maintaining feeders

Cleaning birdfeeders and birdbaths is crucial in preventing the spread of disease among birds.

1. **Feeders** – once or twice a month, immerse your seed feeders in a nine-to-one water-bleach solution, rinsing them thoroughly. In the presence of disease, disinfect them twice as often. You can tell if you have a disease problem because diseased birds are less alert and less active, they feed less and may cower on feeders, they may be reluctant to fly, and their feathers do not appear to be in good shape.
2. **Birdbaths** – empty the water every day. Brush or wipe them clean and rinse, then refill them with fresh water.
3. **Ground** – regardless of the season, food that sits on the ground for even a short time is exposed to potential contamination by dampness, mold, bacteria, animal droppings, lawn fertilizers and pesticides. Rake or sweep up any uneaten seeds and hulls on the ground when you clean your feeders.
4. **Seed storage** – seed will spoil if it gets damp or wet. Store seed in a dry place in metal rodent-proof containers, and do not use it if it becomes moldy. Do not save seed from the spring to the next fall; seed spoils quickly in warm weather. It’s impossible to prevent rain from reaching seed in feeders; if the seed in your feeders becomes moldy, dispose of it (do not pour it onto the ground) and clean the feeders.

Feeding hummingbirds

Hummingbirds depend on sugar-rich nectar for up to 90 percent of their diet; the rest is made up of insects and pollen for protein.

1. Instead of one large feeder, hang several smaller ones in different locations. Keep the feeders far enough apart that the hummers cannot see one another; this will prevent one bird from dominating the rest.
2. Be sure to change the sugar water (see recipe at right) regularly – before it gets cloudy, or about twice a week in warm weather.
3. Hang your feeders in the shade to discourage fermentation and spoilage of the sugar solution.
4. Clean the feeders at least once a week to prevent the growth of mold. Use a solution of one part white vinegar to four parts water, or wash them in hot, soapy water. Rinse them several times before refilling them with nectar.
5. Aim to have your feeders up by May 15. In the fall, keep your feeders up for two weeks after you see the last bird using them. (Contrary to a common fear, the extra food won’t stop a hummer from migrating south when it’s time for it to go.)

Nectar for hummingbirds. Make a sugar solution of one part white sugar (do not use honey or artificial sweeteners) to four parts water. Boil briefly to sterilize and dissolve sugar crystals; do not add red food coloring. Make nectar in batches that will last no longer than a week and store the extra in the refrigerator; do not use it if it becomes cloudy.

Resources:

- Burton, Robert. *National Audubon Society: North American Birdfeeder Handbook*. New York: Dorling Kindersley Publishing, Inc., 1995.
- Kress, Stephen W. *National Audubon Society: The Bird Garden*. New York: Dorling Kindersley Publishing, Inc., 1995.
- Stokes, Donald, and Lillian Stokes. *The Bird Feeder Book*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1987.
- www.audubon.org.
- www.birdfeeding.org.
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