

BIRD-FEEDING TIPS

FOLLOW THESE TIPS TO ATTRACT THE MOST FEATHERED FRIENDS TO YOUR FEEDERS.

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1) Locate bird feeders at different levels

Sparrows, juncos, and towhees usually feed on the ground, while finches and cardinals feed in shrubs, and chickadees, titmice, and woodpeckers feed in trees. To avoid crowding and to 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 well off the ground for woodpeckers, nuthatches, and chickadees.

2) Offer a variety of seeds in separate feeders

A diverse mix of seeds will attract the greatest variety of birds. To avoid waste, offer different seeds in different feeders. Black oil sunflower seed appeals to the greatest number of birds. Offer sunflower seeds, nyjer (thistle) seeds, and peanuts in separate feeders. When using blends, choose mixtures containing sunflower seeds, millet, and cracked corn—the three most popular types of birdseed. Birds that are sunflower specialists will readily eat the sunflower seed and toss the millet and corn to the ground, to be eaten by ground-feeding birds such as sparrows and juncos. Mixtures of peanuts, nuts, and dried fruit attract woodpeckers, nuthatches, and titmice. A relatively few species prefer milo, wheat, and oats, which are featured in less expensive blends.

3) Provide suet during cool weather only

Suet (beef fat) attracts insect-eating birds such as woodpeckers, wrens, chickadees, nuthatches, and titmice. Place the suet in special feeders or net onion bags at least five feet from the ground to keep it out of the reach of dogs. Do not put out suet during hot weather as it can turn rancid; also, dripping fat can damage natural waterproofing on bird feathers.

4) Mix peanut butter and corn meal

Peanut butter is a good substitute for suet in the summer. 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. This all-season mixture attracts woodpeckers, chickadees, titmice, and occasionally warblers.

5) Provide fruit for berry-eating birds

Fruit specialists such as robins, waxwings, bluebirds, and mockingbirds rarely eat birdseed. To attract these birds, soak raisins and currants in water overnight, then place them on a table feeder, or purchase blends with a dried fruit mixture. To attract orioles and tanagers, skewer halved oranges onto a spike near other feeders, or supply nectar feeders.

6) Provide nectar for hummingbirds

Make a sugar solution of one part white sugar to four parts water. Boil briefly to sterilize and dissolve sugar crystals; no need to add red food coloring. Feeders must be washed every few days with very hot water and kept scrupulously clean to prevent the growth of mold.

7) Store seed in secure metal containers

Store seed in metal garbage cans with secure lids to protect it from squirrels and mice. Keep the cans in a cool, dry location; avoid storing in the heat. Damp seeds may grow mold that can be fatal to birds. Overheating can destroy the nutrition and taste of sunflower seeds. For these reasons, it's best not to keep seed from one winter to the next.

8) Discourage squirrels from consuming feeder foods

Squirrels are best excluded by placing feeders on a pole in an open area. Pole-mounted feeders should be about five feet off the ground and protected by a cone-shaped baffle (at least 17 inches diameter) or similar obstacle below the feeder. Locate pole-mounted feeders at least 10 feet from the nearest shrub, tree, or other tall structure. Squirrel feeders stocked with blends that are especially attractive to squirrels and chipmunks can reduce competition for high-priced foods offered at bird feeders. Place squirrel feeders far from bird feeders to further reduce competition.

9) Locate feeders to reduce window collisions

In the United States, approximately one billion birds die each year from flying into windows. Protect birds from collisions by placing feeders within three feet of windows, if possible. Mobiles and opaque decorations hanging outside windows also help to prevent bird strikes. Or attach fruit tree netting outside windows to deflect birds from the glass.

10) Keep cats indoors

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. Outdoor cats are especially dangerous to birds in the spring when fledglings are on the ground. Bells on cat collars are usually ineffective for deterring predation.

11) Clean feeders and rake up spilled grain and hulls

Uneaten seed can become soggy and grow deadly mold. Empty and clean feeders twice a year (spring and fall), or more often if feeders are used during humid summers. Using a long-handled bottlebrush, scrub with dish detergent and rinse with a powerful hose; then soak in a bucket of 10 percent non-chlorine bleach solution, rinse well, and dry in the sun. In early spring, rake up spilled grain and sunflower hulls.