

Bird Feeding 101

– Everything You Ever Wanted
To Know About Feeding Birds –



Close your eyes for a moment and picture this – a white carpet of new, soft, sparkling snow... a red cedar, hopper bird feeder loaded with black oil sunflower seeds and mounted on a wood post with a white “top hat”... and moving, brightly colored objects zooming in and out of your “picture.”

This work of art is bird feeding at its finest!

Backyard bird feeding is a convenient way to enjoy wildlife. According to a recent Census Report, over 63 million Americans, young and old, feed, watch, or photograph wildlife. And, they spend \$29 billion annually doing it.

What has made watching birds the fastest growing hobby in the country, second only to gardening? Whatever it is, watching birds, like watching fish or other animals, seems to make people feel good.

How do our feeding “hand-outs” affect the birds? Little research has been done on that question. But we do know that some birds – cardinals, mockingbirds, and tufted titmice – have extended their winter range northward, perhaps because of an increased availability of food at feeding stations.

There is no indication, however, that backyard bird feeding has had a negative affect on wild bird populations as a whole.

Backyard bird feeding can, however, have an adverse effect on an individual bird. There may be a higher incidence of disease and birds injured by flying into windows. But, you can take precautions to minimize these problems.

How to Start

No matter where you live, you can put food outside your door, and some creature, feathered or furred, will show its appreciation

and make an appearance. That's all it takes. Once you get started, it's hard to stop.

Before you know it, you're learning bird names. After awhile, you'll start to recognize individuals and the messages in their behavior and song.

When you get to the point where you want to attract and "keep" a particular species, what you do will be determined by where you live and the time of year.

In the long run, a squirrel-proof feeder or any feeder on a pole with a baffle is the least aggravating solution. The most effective squirrel-proof feeder is the pole-mounted metal "hopper" type.

If you must hang a feeder, select a tube protected with metal mesh. Most plastic "squirrel-proof" feeders, despite manufacturers' claims, may eventually succumb to rodent teeth.

If you have the "right" situation in your yard, a pole with a baffle should suffice. Any wood or plastic feeder can be effective when mounted on a pole with a plastic or metal baffle, if the pole is at least 10 feet or more from a tree limb or trunk.

Once you've determined where you're going to put your feeder, you're ready to go shopping. In addition to good looks, think about...

- How durable is it?
- Will it keep the seeds dry?
- How easy is it to clean?
- How much seed will it hold?
- How many birds will it feed at one time?
- Which species will use it?

Durability

There seems to be no end to the material used in making bird feeders. You can buy "disposable" plastic bag feeders; feeders made of cloth, nylon, vinyl, and metal netting; clear, lexan, colored and PVC plastic tubes; ceramic and terra cotta; redwood, western cedar, birch, pine, and plywood; sheet metal and aluminized steel; glass tubes and bottles.

How long a feeder lasts depends on how much effort you put into maintaining it, the effects of weather, and whether squirrels can get to it.

Dry Seeds

Water can get into any feeder – regardless of how careful you are to protect it. Seed will spoil when it gets damp or wet. Cloth, vinyl, nylon, and metal netting feeders are inexpensive, but they do not protect your seed. You can improve them by adding a plastic dome.

Most wood, plastic, ceramic, and solid metal feeders will keep seed dry, but water can get into

the feeding portals. Look for feeders with drainage holes in the bottoms of both the feeder hopper and the seed tray.

Even bowl-type feeders and trays with drainage holes will clog with seed and bird droppings. Add rainwater and you have an unhealthy broth. Look for shallow plate-like seed trays. The purpose of a tray is to catch dropped seeds while allowing spent seed shells to blow away.

Cleaning

Any zookeeper and cage bird owner will tell you, when you feed birds in a confined area, you have to expect bird droppings, feathers, an occasional insect or two, and left-over food mess.

While you don't have to wash the feeder daily, you should clean it regularly.

Diseases like salmonella can grow in moldy, wet seed and bird droppings in your feeder tray and on the ground below. It's a good idea to move your feeders (just a foot or so) each season to give the ground underneath time to assimilate the seed debris and bird droppings.

Keeping your feeders clean should not become a major undertaking. The degree of maintenance required is directly related to the types of birds you want to attract.

A thistle feeder for goldfinches should be cleaned about once a month depending

on how often it rains. Feeding hummingbirds requires cleaning at the very least, weekly, preferably more often – two or three times a week. Sunflower and suet feeders may need to be cleaned only once a month.

Feeders made of plastic, ceramic, and glass are easy to clean. Wash them in a bucket of hot, soapy water fortified with a capful or two of chlorine bleach, then give them a run through your dishwasher.

Use the same regimen with wood feeders, but substitute another disinfectant for the bleach so your wood won't fade.

Food Capacity

The ideal feeder capacity varies with your situation, and the types of birds you want to attract.

If you feed hummingbirds, big feeders are not always better. One hummingbird will drink about twice its body weight (less than an ounce) each day.

Early in the season, hummers are territorial and won't share a feeder. A 16-ounce feeder can be wasteful, or indeed lethal, because artificial nectar (sugar water) can ferment in the hot summer sun.

If you see only one hummer in your yard, a two-ounce feeder is more than enough. On the other hand, if you live in the Southwest, and have 34 hummers in your yard, a 16-ounce feeder may not be big enough.

If you opt for a large volume seed feeder, be sure to protect it from the weather and keep it clean. If, after months of use, the birds suddenly abandon your feeder full of seed, it's time for a cleaning.

How Many Birds?

If too many birds at your feeder becomes a problem, you can control their numbers by putting out smaller amounts of seed, by using specialty seeds, or by using restrictive feeders.

If you fill your feeder only when it's empty, the birds will look for food elsewhere. They'll return as long as you continue to fill it.

You can virtually eliminate visits by birds you'd rather not see by offering seeds they won't eat. Be selective in your choice of seeds.

If you use more than one type of seed, put them in separate feeders. This will reduce wasted seeds, as birds will toss unwanted seeds out of a feeder to get to their favorites.

Birds that visit your feeder have very specific preferences. Most prefer sunflower. Some prefer millet. A few prefer peanuts. None seem to prefer the other grains used in the mixes: corn, milo, red millet, oats, wheat, and canary seed.

If you want to feed only cardinals, doves, and white-throated sparrows, switch from black oil sunflower to safflower.

If you want only finches and an occasional dove and white-throated sparrow, try niger thistle.

If you want only jays, titmice, and white-throated sparrows, try peanuts.

Another way to discourage unwanted birds is to use specialty feeders that, for the most part, allow only "select" birds to feed.

The most non-selective feeders are the tray, platform, or hopper feeders.

You can encourage small birds with feeders that restrict access. Wood feeders with vertical bars and feeders covered with wire mesh frustrate the larger birds.

Tube feeders without trays also restrict access to small birds. Remove the perches, and you've further selected only those birds capable of clinging – finches, chickadees, titmice, and woodpeckers.

Add vertical perches to tube thistle feeders, and you'll limit accessibility primarily to the goldfinches.

If starlings are a problem at your suet feeder, you can discourage them by using a suet feeder with access only at the bottom. Starlings are reluctant to perch upside down. Chickadees and woodpeckers don't find that a problem.

Species Variety

The species you attract is determined primarily by the seeds you offer.

Black oil sunflower is the hands-down favorite of all the birds that visit tube and house type feeders. White proso millet is favored by birds who visit platform feeders (doves and sparrows). Ducks, geese, and quail will eat corn.

Many of the cereal grains (corn, milo, oats, canary, wheat, rape, flax, and buckwheat) in mixed bird seeds are NOT favorites of birds that visit tube feeders.

Watch a feeder filled with a seed mix and you'll see the birds methodically drop or kick out most of the seeds to get to their favorite – sunflower. Birds will also kick out artificial "berry" pellets, processed seed flavored and colored to look like "real" fruit.

Seeds that wind up on the ground are likely to be contaminated by dampness and bird droppings. If the birds don't eat them, rodents will.

The most effective way to attract the largest variety of birds to your yard is to put out separate feeders for each food:

- Starling-resistant suet feeder
- Hopper feeder for sunflower
- Bluebird feeder
- Wire mesh cage feeder for peanuts
- Nectar feeder
- Tube feeder for thistle
- Stationary or tray fruit feeder
- Hopper or platform feeder for millet



If I Stop Feeding, What Will Happen?

Some people don't feed birds because they are concerned that the birds will become dependent on the feeders for survival and if they stop, the birds will starve to death.

Normally, this is not true. Feeders serve as supplements to natural food sources, not replacements. Birds that visit feeders develop a routine or pattern of visiting feeders. If your feeder is empty on a particular day, they simply go on to the next. If your feeder remains empty for a long period of time, they may quit coming at all.

The exception to this is when there are snow storms, ice storms, and periods of severe, prolonged cold – birds then need food badly. Your feeder can make a difference in the birds survival.

This article was written by Thomas D. Patrick, President and Founder of the WindStar Wildlife Institute, a national, non-profit conservation organization whose mission is to help individuals and families establish or improve the wildlife habitat on their properties.

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