

Wildlife Viewing Area: Bird Feeders and Feeding

The best way to feed birds is to plant or encourage a variety of **native plants** that provide berries, seeds and nuts. Some of these will also provide cover and shelter, a place to nest, nesting materials, water droplets or water captured in leaves, and insects for insect-eating birds.

It is good to provide extra feeding for birds in the winter. This feeding should continue throughout early spring (March being the most difficult month for birds), until insects are out, and other natural foods appear in abundance.

Water: Birds also benefit from a source of water for drinking and bathing; in fact, some birds are attracted to water that are not interested in feeders, for drinking or bathing, so this brings more variety to the WVA. Water should be very shallow, and should also have items nearby (rocks, sticks, plants, etc.) on which the bird can perch. In the winter, provide heat to the water with a small electric heater. Any time of year, running or bubbling water is especially attractive to birds. Moving water also discourages mosquito larvae. Please see attached instructions for these types of water features.

Nuisance animals: *Raccoons and squirrels* love to visit bird feeders, and they are relentless and creative when it comes to trying to get into them. One option is to bring feeders indoors at night and then place them outside again at dawn (however, these animals don't always limit activity to darkness). Another option is to give those animals other places to eat so that they are busy elsewhere. As long as you have bird feeders, you will have these animals visiting, and trying to discourage them will only be constant frustration. *Trapping them and moving them to another location is not advisable.* You will just cause problems for someone else, it takes plenty of time and trouble, and there will always be more animals to replace the ones you moved. It's best just to work with the nature of the beast. Squirrels love cobs of field corn, which can be put on spikes that are attached to wooden "shelves", which can be mounted on a tree or post. Provide raccoons with a feeding trough or two – these can just be half-logs that are scraped out enough to create a depression. Keep these on the ground, to the side, so they are not directly in the bird feeding area. It's a little like finding things to keep individual children busy when they want to bother each other.

If there is a bird feeder atop a pole, a metal tube can be put around the pole to discourage raiders, particularly snakes, which sometimes climb poles to go after birds.

Sometimes even deer will raid a bird feeder for the feed.

Nuisance bird species are discussed in other sections.

Success at the Bird Feeding Station

Be careful what kinds of seed you buy: It is best to use only the kinds of seed that native birds need so that there is very little waste, so that the feed is most nutritious, and so as not to attract nuisance birds. **DO NOT buy cheap mixed seed.** It often contains poor quality seed. Many birds will just toss away what they don't want in order to get to the ones they need, wasting most of the purchase. If you have any left, use it up by sprinkling it on the ground, or in a raccoon trough, but be aware that some cheap seed mix ingredients (such as cracked corn) can attract nuisance birds and animals.

Also be careful about purchasing suet cakes (see Feeding Suet and Other Fats).

Be careful about the kinds of feeders you buy or make, or accept as donations. Some will not be preferred, some will not last long, and some might even be more attractive to pests. Match the bird feeder types to the feed, and vice versa, as well as to the birds you wish to attract. They should also be easy to clean and use.

Be knowledgeable about the placement of the feeders. Placement near tree limbs, for example,

makes it easier for squirrels, raccoons and cats to get to them, or to the birds.

It is important to clean the feeders and piles of spilled seed and refuse (See Keeping Things Clean).
Do not use any kind of pesticides in or near the feeding area.

The types of feeders discussed in the text:

- platform feeders
- tube feeders (good for discouraging nuisance birds)
- other types of seed feeders
- suet feeders (for woodpeckers, nuthatches, wrens, chickadees, bluebirds, etc.)
- ground-feeding (for doves, cardinals, juncos, etc.)
- fruit feeders

Seed feeders

Finch Feeders:

These are feeders specifically for finches (Goldfinch, House Finch, Purple Finch, etc.). They are usually **hanging tubes**, but also long **mesh “socks”**, and have very small holes. There is even a type of tube feeder called an “upside-down finch feeder”, to feed Goldfinches, which are the only birds that are able to hang upside down from the perches (the feeding holes are placed below each perch).

Finch feeders are always filled with a type of **black thistle seed, called Niger**.

Finches also love to eat other seed (such as black sunflower) from other feeders. They can crack open the shells with their short, very thick beaks; in fact, since they can crack them open on-the-spot (unlike most other birds, who tend to take them elsewhere to open), they can leave a lot of shells on surface feeders.

Tube Seed Feeders:

These are, simply, long, clear tubes with feeding holes and small perches, which are hung from branches or poles. Look for types that are easy to take apart and clean, so that old seed doesn't get caught up in the bottom, where it can rot and sicken birds, and make sure the holes are large enough for average perching birds to use. Tube feeders are used by many different kinds of small, perching birds. An advantage is that most types of “nuisance birds” are not able to feed from them. However, some larger birds that are welcome at feeding stations may not be able to feed from the tubes, so make sure they have other options. Another advantage is that all the mess created by shells and dropped seed ends up on the ground, not on the feeder.

It is best to fill them with Black Sunflower Seed in the shell, or as shelled kernels.

Hopper Feeders:

Hopper feeders are filled through the top, and then seed comes through space in the bottom to a tray, where birds perch to feed. They have a top which extends over the container and which is removable so you can fill the hopper. Some of them look a little like houses, with a removable, sloped “roof“. They may be made of plastic or wood, and some may have metal components. Wooden ones are nice, but they can rot in places, or be harder to clean. Some hopper feeders may have a cylindrical hopper with a round top cover and tray.

“Nuisance birds”, such as Starlings and Brown-Headed Cowbirds, are better able to use many kinds of hopper feeders, which, of course, is a disadvantage. One way to deal with this is to make sure it is not filled with seed that is very attractive to them, such as corn and millet. Again, Black Sunflower Seed is the best choice. Another possible disadvantage is that Finches, who crack seeds open on-the-spot, cause shell debris to fill up more quickly on the tray, so it must be cleaned off more often. If this is a problem,

filling with shelled seeds will help. An advantage is that a wider variety of birds can visit the hopper, compared to the tubes.

Platform Feeders:

Platform feeders are simply flat surfaces onto which seed is sprinkled. They often have sides to prevent seed from spilling, and are easy to make. They can be hung from a pole, attached to the top of a pole, attached to the outside of a window at the bottom (like a window box) or set on the ground. They are usually metal or wooden. Again, wooden feeders can be more difficult to keep clean, and may rot over time. A platform feeder should have screen wire on the bottom for air circulation and drainage.

A platform feeder can attract larger birds, and a greater variety. Blue Jays and Doves, for example, can use them easily (Doves prefer eating closer to the ground, but sometimes use a higher feeder). Larger items can be added to the mix on a platform feeder (such as peanuts, other larger nuts, and fruits). A disadvantage is that “nuisance birds” have no trouble getting to these, and can form a dense congregation at times, excluding other birds. Again, careful choice of seed and other items can help to discourage the undesired ones, which tend to eat voraciously and drain a feeder quickly.

Corn (shelled, NOT cracked), Safflower seed, and unsalted peanuts (in or out of the shell) can be used in ground-level platform feeders. This is also a good opportunity to feed the large Striped Sunflower seed as well as fruit.

Ground-Feeding:

Some birds, such as Doves and Juncos, prefer eating from the ground. They can be fed from a ground-level platform feeder or with seed sprinkled directly on the ground. Other birds sometimes eat at ground level, such as Cardinals and some types of Sparrows. Shelled (not cracked) corn can be added, as well as unsalted Peanuts, Safflower seeds, Striped Sunflower seeds and fruit. Many ground-feeding birds clean up seed that is dropped from other feeders. There is the usual disadvantage of attracting “nuisance birds”. Do not include any other food than the above-mentioned, and be sure to keep debris cleaned up.

Miscellaneous Seed Feeders:

There are a variety of other ways to feed seed-eating birds. There are small, acrylic feeders that attach directly to the outside of a window with suction cups, so that it's easy to watch them from inside (which is especially nice for children). However, the suction seems to wear off after some time, causing the feeder to fall on the ground and possibly break. They are not useful for long.

A nice homemade version of a feeder can be made simply with a gourd (you can even grow the gourds in a garden). One type of gourd especially good for this is called Birdhouse Gourd, because it has the perfect shape for this use. Simply cut a large hole in two or three places around the gourd, leaving space below to hold seed, and making the holes large enough for birds to fly in and out. Then attach a hanger to the top. These do need to be replaced now and then, but they are a good project with no cost. Feeders can also be made from materials such as milk cartons, milk jugs and plastic liter bottles. Feeder types are limited only by a person's imagination or budget, but the important things to remember are that it should match the kinds of birds you want to attract, it should have drainage holes and be easy to clean, it should be easy for birds to access, and the type of feed used should be in accord. Another way to feed sunflower seeds is to grow sunflowers, of course. When the seeds are mature, birds will come to the sunflower heads to help themselves, but the plant heads can also be cut off and allowed to dry, then set out on a platform feeder or stuck into the end of a wooden hopper feeder.

Seeds to use:

Stick to using these seeds in feeders, using the right kind for the particular feeder:

Black Sunflower seed (*Helianthus annuus*) – in the shell or unshelled kernels*

Striped Sunflower seed

Safflower (*Carthamus tinctor*)

Niger (black thistle) (*Guizotya abyssinica*)

Peanuts, unsalted (*Arachis hypogaea*) – in the shell or shelled*

Shelled Corn

*benefit of shelled seed: Many birds have to take seed away from the feeder and work at getting it open, either by holding the seed between feet or sticking it into bark, then knocking at it with the beak to get it open. This requires more energy. During very cold winter days, birds expend much more energy trying to keep warm. Providing unshelled seed helps these birds to use less energy processing seeds to eat so they have more for coping with weather conditions.

Seeds to avoid (read labels carefully):

Milo (*Sorghum vulgare*) – little round red seeds

Wheat (*Triticum aestivum*)

Canary Seed (*Phalaris canariensis*)

Flax (*Linum berlandieri*)

Rapeseed (*Brassicinapus*)

Rice (*Oryza sativa*)

Cracked corn

Feeding Suet and other Fats

Some birds need to eat fats in the winter, which can be provided by suet, pure lard or peanut butter.

Mostly, suet eaters are birds that cling to surfaces like tree bark or cages, such as Nuthatches and all of the Woodpeckers. These birds and some others, including wrens, bluebirds and chickadees, prefer to eat insects in the summer.

Commercially prepared suet comes in squares, balls and other shapes, often molded to accommodate suet feeders that are sold near them. They also often come filled with seeds, nuts or fruits, but it is not necessary to include these. Unfortunately, some seed-filled suet cakes include undesirable seeds, so it is important to read labels carefully. Even acceptable seed can be wasted by a bird who wants only the suet, letting the seeds fall to the ground. Also available commercially is suet that can be scooped from the container and smeared.

Commercial suet cakes are made with rendered beef fat. “Real” suet is hard and crumbly, and can be found at a butcher’s shop or some meat departments. Either way, make sure that it has a high fat content. Soften real suet for making suet cakes or balls, or crumble it directly into a platform or gourd feeder for those insect-eating birds that don’t vertically cling, such as Cardinals and Mockingbirds.

Unsalted peanut butter can be used the same way as suet or lard.

Suet “cages” can be bought to hang on trees or poles, or to attach to a tree. Some hopper feeders have suet cages attached to their ends.

Homemade suet feeders are easily made:

- make a wire cage suet feeder, using hardware cloth
- find a length of tree limb or untreated wood, drill holes down the side, add a hanger at the top, and fill the holes with the fat
- make suet balls and hang them inside mesh bags, such as onion bags.
- Smear suet or other fat directly on tree bark, or crumble into a feeder.

Another easily made feeder is to smear unsalted peanut butter on a pine cone and hang it up. This is a

good project for children.

Feeding Fruit

Generally speaking, birds that prefer insects in the summer will turn to fruits in the winter. One way to attract fruit-eaters is to plant the *native shrubs, trees, vines and other plants* that offer them (See: Suggested Native Shrubs and Vines for Planting). A good plan is to choose and plant a variety of species so that different types of native fruits ripen at different times throughout the year, some still hanging on in the winter. These plants tend to provide other benefits, too, such as protection, cover, nesting material, nesting sites, or bugs to eat.

During late winter and early spring (or even into early summer), it is good to offer birds some extra fruit in feeders. By then, much of the native berries and other fruits have been eaten up, rotted, dropped or those left are of low fat content. New native fruits are not developed and abundant yet, for the most part. When there is an abundance of wild fruit, some can be harvested and frozen to use in winter feeders.

Fruits that can be offered in feeders (note: information gleaned from *Birds in the Yard Month by Month*, by Sharon Sorenson):

Cherries, berries, halved grapes

Overripe fruits such as grapefruit, orange, apple halves, pineapple, banana chunks, peach chunks

Dried fruit that has been chopped and rehydrated in hot water: figs, dates, prunes, raisins, currants, cranberries, cherries, blueberries, etc.

Ways to feed fruit:

- Cut open fresh fruit and place on a pie pan or platform feeder
- Drive a nail into something wooden (e.g.: a fencepost), cut off the nail head, and jam fruit pieces onto the spike
- Make “cups” from orange or grapefruit rinds and fill with fruit (set out or hang)
- Make a fruit-and-suet blend: melt pure lard, add chopped fruit (or rehydrated dry fruit pieces), pour into tuna or cat food cans until cool, and freeze unused portions for later.

Keeping Things Clean

(information gleaned from Sharon Sorenson book)

It is important to keep feeders and the feeding area clean. Birds can be affected by disease and illness from mold, bird and animal droppings, rancid seeds, spoiled suet and rancid liquid in hummingbird feeders. Also, abundant dropped seeds and shells can attract undesirable birds and animals.

- Keep spilled seed and shells cleaned up (do not compost sunflower shells)
- Empty feeders about once a week to avoid old, rancid, moldy seed, fats or fruit*
- Clean feeders about once a month**
- Keep hopper trays cleared of shells and other debris (remember that finches tend to eat in place and leave lots of shells)
- Store seed in a dry, enclosed, cool place to avoid spoilage
- During very warm times, rendered suet can be used, as it will not turn rancid

*If birds have not been emptying out a feeder in enough time, it could be the location of the feeder, the time of year, the current weather, or the feeder itself. Try putting the feeder in a different location. If it is due to the time of year, or to severe or very mild weather, put less feed in the feeder during that time. If the birds still do not visit, remove the feeder, possibly replacing it with a different type.

**To clean a feeder: take it down, empty out the seed, and scrub all parts with soapy water. To sanitize a feeder: wash it again, using 9 parts water to 10 parts bleach, rinse thoroughly, and dry. It is sometimes useful to use a scrub-brush for stubborn dirt and caked debris. One with a long handle can be used for hard-to-reach places. A strong spray of water can help, too. Some cities or towns have a location or organization that offers special bird-feeder cleanings at certain times of the year. This is something to consider offering at a nature center.

Summary:

- Plant or encourage native plants that feed and shelter native birds
- Choose seed, fats and fruits carefully for feeders
- Choose birdfeeder types carefully – match to the types of feed and types of birds to attract, and consider ease of care and cleaning
- Offer a variety of feeding situations to attract a variety of birds
- Use various tactics to discourage nuisance animals and birds
- Offer shallow water (on the ground), preferably bubbling or moving, for drinking and bathing
- Keep feeders and the feeding area clean, and the feed fresh

Some Resources:

(Note: see attached supplements for various instructions)

Sorenson, Sharon; *Birds in the Yard Month by Month: what's there and why, and how to attract those that aren't*; Stackpole Books; 2013.

Finding out what plants are native to our area:

<http://plants.USDA.gov>

www.inpaws.org