



Winter Bird Feeding

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If you're like me, you love to set out feeders in the backyard for our non-migratory songbirds. Watching birds come to feeders is a lot of fun - paying attention to which species are visiting the feeders, how they interact with each other, and what their preferred foods are. For this reason, people have been feeding birds for well over a hundred years. Today, it is so common there are stores entirely devoted to selling birdfeed, feeders, and other supplies.

Outside of our own enjoyment, why feed the birds at all? Can't the wild birds find enough food to survive on their own without us? After all, they made a go of it for millennia before people started to set out birdfeeders.

Perhaps the best reason for feeding birds is that it is an entertaining way to learn about birds and connect with the natural world. Sure, most of the songbirds in the wild would do just fine without us, but in the winter months when natural food is scarce, the birds appreciate a little extra food, particularly if it is high quality and nutritious. The food supplied at birdfeeders is only a supplement; we are simply making survival a little easier for them. In terms of having the greatest impact, the most critical time to feed birds is in the wintertime, especially late in the season. By the end of winter many natural food sources are exhausted or else unavailable, deeply buried in the snow. Non-migratory birds set up their feeding territories before the winter. According to NH Fish and Game, bird feeders can be out from December 1 to April 1 to avoid problems with bears. It may take a while for birds to locate feeders and be drawn away from natural food sources, but cold temperatures and winter storms will bring them in.

Seasonal Variation

Bird populations fluctuate naturally from year to year, as do the number of birds visiting feeders. Some years chickadees are the most prevalent species at feeders; other years, juncos may be more numerous. The availability of resources has a profound impact both on bird population size and feeder activity. Seasonal growing conditions influence how much natural food is available. Non-migratory songbirds are diverted or drawn to feeders depending on the availability of natural foods. In years that plants produce an exceptional amount of seeds, comparatively few birds visit feeders. The same holds true in reverse.

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a helping hand.



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What do they eat?

In the summer months, songbirds predominantly consume protein rich insects and spiders. In winter, many non-migratory songbirds must switch to eating seeds and fruit. Not all songbirds will use a backyard feeder, only those that have diets which reflect what we can practically offer them. The key to attracting a variety of species is to offer a variety of different foods. Seeds, grains, nuts, baked goods, suet, and fruit can all be used.

In terms of bringing in the greatest number of species, black oil sunflower seeds are the best. They are nutritious, high in energy, little enough for small birds to crack open, and are utilized by nearly every common birdfeeder species. If you can only offer one food, choose black oil sunflower.

Other common foods enjoyed by various songbirds are white millet, nyjer (thistle seed), safflower seeds, milo, peanuts, peanut hearts and cracked corn. Be careful when purchasing seed mixes. Many of these are full of cheap filler seeds, such as red milo, that very few birds prefer. Creating your own custom mix is a great way to suit the preferences of the birds in your own backyard.

In the wintertime, beef suet is a great choice for attracting woodpeckers and nuthatches and an array of other species. Suet is best used in cold weather, as it will go rancid quickly in warm temperatures. Specially made suet cakes sold specifically for bird feeding can be used year-round. You can find beef suet in the meat department of any supermarket.

Table 1: What do they eat?

	Black Oil Sunflower	Safflower	Nyjer	Peanut Hearts	Millet	Milo	Cracked Corn	Suet
Doves	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Woodpeckers	✓	✓		✓				✓
Jays	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Sparrows	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	
Juncos	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Titmice	✓	✓		✓				✓
Chickadees	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓
Nuthatches	✓	✓		✓				✓
Cardinals	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	
Firches	✓		✓			✓		

What is the best type of bird feeder?

There are many different types of bird feeders, some of which are better for attracting some species than others. Any feeders that you use should be sturdy, tight enough to keep seeds dry, and simple to disassemble. Hopper feeders are great for larger birds such as blue jays, while tube feeders best serve smaller birds. Tray feeders are perfect for enticing ground feeding birds such as juncos, sparrows, and mourning doves. Suet is usually best served in a mesh bag or wire basket suspended from a pole or attached to a tree. You need not spend money on commercial feeders. Many effective bird feeders can be made at home quite simply. Even a cut out plastic soda or

milk bottle can create a functional feeder. Providing a variety of different feeders is a sure way to attract a diversity of species.

To limit waste, only put out as much food as birds can eat in a day. Food that sits out for too long can spoil after exposure to the elements and should be discarded promptly. This is especially important for tray feeders.

Creating the right habitat

Just as important as supplying quality food is providing a quality habitat to songbirds.

- ✓ *If your yard offers shelter and unfrozen water source, the birds are likely to stay a while. Unfrozen water is especially difficult to find in the winter months. Birds need this for both drinking and bathing. A **bird bath** consistently filled with clean, fresh water and fitted with an immersion style water heater will do just the trick.*
- ✓ *Place feeders close to natural shelter in the form of trees and shrubs*
- ✓ *Diverse mix of plants—combining deciduous and evergreen trees and shrubs of different ages will mimic the natural landscape.*
- ✓ *If your yard is currently devoid of shelter, a brush pile or an old Christmas tree placed near your feeders can provide it.*
- ✓ *Your feeders should also be easy to see from windows of your home and easy to access and refill.*

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR
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Are there any negative impacts to feeding wild birds?

Feeding birds can expose them to some hazards they might otherwise avoid. The risks of predation by housecats and window strike increase by feeding stations. Disease is another area of concern when it comes to feeding the birds. Poorly maintained feeders can contribute to the spread of diseases. Avoid overcrowding at feeders by spacing a number of feeders apart. Also make sure to regularly clean up piles of spent seed hulls and droppings, and keep food storage containers clean and dry. Galvanized trash bins with tight fitting lids are perfect for storing food and preventing rodents and insects from getting in. Always promptly dispose of wet or spoiled food. It is a good idea to make a habit of cleaning and disinfecting feeders. Use soap and hot water to remove residues of food and droppings, then fully immerse feeders in a solution of one part bleach and nine parts water.

Bird feeders can also attract nuisance wildlife. Squirrels, chipmunks, mice, rats, raccoons, and bears are all liable to consume bird feed and damage feeders. Placing feeders at least 10 feet away from buildings and trees will prevent squirrels and raccoons from jumping or dropping onto feeders. Keep animals from reaching feeders on poles by using physical barriers such as baffles. Feeders that are suspended from trees should have baffles placed above them. Reducing the amount of spilled seed on the ground is a good way to limit the number of rodents foraging under feeders. Black bears pose the greatest threat to birdfeeders. Once a bear discovers a well-stocked bird feeder, it will keep coming back until that food source is eliminated. To limit this risk, take down bird feeders in the spring before bears become active or at the first sign of bear activity.

While wild birds are not entirely dependent on bird feeders, they can become accustomed to accessing this easy food source. If you decide to stop feeding the birds or will be going away for a while, gradually taper off the amount of food you are providing. Starting a large feeding venture and then stopping abruptly when food is scarce in late winter or during periods of extreme weather has the potential to cause harm. Once you've starting feeding the birds, continue until the last of the snow is gone and the buds are beginning to break.



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above photo credit: John Williams, UNH Master Gardener Volunteer

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About the Author

Emma Erler serves as the primary source of research-based information related to gardening, agriculture, and pest management for Cooperative Extension's Education Center and Master Gardener volunteer programs.

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