

Bird Feeding



Planting is the best way to ensure you meet the needs of all kinds of birds throughout the seasons. Planting and nurturing of a variety of native perennials, shrubs, and trees provides natural food and shelter. Feeders allow you to supplement your plantings with a greater diversity of food and are a great way to see birds up close.

Feeding birds is similar to managing any pet, but with considerably less work. Good planning is critical to success.

Concerns

There are several concerns about birdfeeding. These have to do with the effect of bird feeders on bird behaviour and survival. Studies have found that birds do not lose their ability to find natural food sources. In fact, for the most part, birds use feeders as a supplement to their natural diet. Feeders are of more importance during extreme and prolonged cold snaps.

Keeping feeding stations well-stocked throughout the winter is important. Many bird species cover large areas in their search for food, and a feeder is just one stop of many. Territorial birds, however, may have set up their winter territory based on the presence of a particular feeding station as an important food source. For the sake of these species, be sure to fill the feeders when you'll be away for a short time, and ask a neighbour to take over if you're gone for longer. Once spring is in full bloom and there are lots of natural food sources around, the feeding station can be phased out.

People also worry that feeders may subject bird visitors to window collisions, disease, or predation by cats or hawks. Precautions, such as proper feeder placement, cleanliness, proper seed storage, and the provision of shelter, helps to make feeding stations safe places for birds.

Types of feeders

Birds come in a wide variety of shapes, sizes, and colours and each prefers different types of food and different places to feed. Some birds, such as finches, prefer hanging feeders with individual perches. Juncos, and other ground-feeding birds, like to eat on the ground but will also frequent a low platform feeder. The best way to attract a wide variety of birds is to provide an assortment of food at several different feeders.

Don't paint birdfeeders, as the particles may be harmful to birds. Natural colours are better as birds are wary of bright, conspicuous colours.

Ground Feeding

This simple method is not generally recommended as it attracts pests and food can become contaminated. It is especially dangerous near bushes where cats can hide.

Platform Feeder

Those birds that like to feed on the ground, such as juncos and sparrows, will adapt to a low platform feeder that allows better protection from predators. These feeders are easy to make but leave seeds open to the elements. Drainage holes are a necessity, as is regular cleaning.

Hopper Feeder

Hopper feeders are generally box-shaped and dispense seeds by gravity. They keep seed clean, dry, and readily available even in a snowstorm. Features to look for are visibility of seed level, ease of mounting and removal (for cleaning), and ability to hold a good quantity of seed. These feeders are usually mounted on their own pole and have a squirrel baffle underneath. If you're looking for a hopper feeder made of wood, weather-resistant cedar is a good choice.

Silo or Tube Feeder

Tube feeders are usually inexpensive and easy to use and move. They dispense seeds through holes in the sides (there is a special one for the smaller niger seed).

Suet Feeder

There are many styles available. These feeders simply hold chunks of suet (fat) or a block of commercial suet/seed mixture. Wood or coated wire won't stick to the birds' feet or tongues in extreme weather. Hang suet feeders in a tree or on a post. If squirrels become a problem, use a baffle.

Location

- Bird feeders have to be well-located to work properly. Place them next to trees or shrubs — preferably evergreen — to provide birds with shelter. But keep them far enough from trees so that cats can't creep up and pounce during mealtime.
- Don't forget to place bird feeders in locations visible from your windows so that you can enjoy the visitors you attract. Consider year-round access for refilling.
- To lessen collisions, place feeders either less than 1 metre or more than 3 metres from windows. Drawing the drapes can help, as can hanging paper, material, or foil streamers outside windows.
- Keep feeders away from decks, where spilled seeds can attract rodent pests. Use feeders with large trays to prevent spills, and clean up those seeds that do spill to deter these pests.

Food

- Learn what birds are in your area and what types of food they prefer.
- To attract a diversity of birds, put out a variety of feeders with different foods.
- Separating food types and feeders will help give smaller birds a chance to eat without being scared away by the larger birds. You can also hang tubular

feeders with short (or no) perches to discourage the larger birds.

- The favourite food choice is sunflower seeds, which attract purple finches, cardinals, goldfinches, grosbeaks, juncos, chickadees, nuthatches, and many other birds. Black oil sunflower seeds are especially favoured because of their higher oil and calorie content.
- Niger seed is a favourite of goldfinches, and also appeals to pine siskins and house finches. It requires a special tube feeder with tiny slots.
- A wide variety of commercial birdseed mixes are available. Mixes that contain a high proportion of items such as hulled oats, rice, peanut hearts, corn, and wheat can bring in pests such as pigeons, starlings, and house sparrows. If you use mixed seed, place it on a platform feeder so that birds don't create waste by tossing seeds out in search of their favourite.
- Do not put out salty, mouldy, or sugary foods.
- Some birds require a source of grit to help them digest their food. Clean sand, budgie gravel, or canary grit sprinkled on the floor of your platform feeder will help to meet this need. You can make your own grit by rinsing eggshells, baking them at 250°F for about 20 minutes, and finely grinding them.
- Limit your use of peanut butter, as it may cause health problems for birds and can also get matted in their feathers. Choose natural peanut butter (without sugar or salt) or make your own by grinding roasted peanuts in a blender. Be sure to mix peanut butter with an equal part of cornmeal, suet, rolled oats, and/or cracked corn to absorb the oil.
- Fresh fruits such as currants, cranberries, and oranges can attract birds such as robins. If you use dried fruit, soak it in water first.
- Add a source of clean water in spring, summer, and fall. Heated birdbaths in very cold winter weather can create problems for birds.
- Check out the accompanying table to see the favourite feeder foods of some of the more common backyard birds.

Suet

Suet is a high-energy food for birds such as chickadees, nuthatches, woodpeckers, and other insect-eating birds that appreciate a source of animal fat in winter to stay warm. You can either buy commercially made suet or make your own.

- To make your own suet, buy raw beef fat or suet from the butcher, grind it up, and mix it with seeds or dried fruit. Store it in the freezer.
- If you purchase suet, look for brands that are free of preservatives.
- Don't add pan drippings to your suet — they contain too much salt and other substances harmful to birds.

- You can use a wide variety of treats when making suet, including acorns, oats, cracked corn, hickory nuts, and fresh, chopped fruit. Experiment to see what your birds like the most.
- Remove old suet from feeders in warm weather to prevent it from going rancid.
- Hang the suet feeder from a branch or on a dead tree. Placing it on the trunk of a live tree can invite invasions by tree-damaging insects and fungi.
- Don't tie the suet with string, as birds might get their feet tangled up.
- In the summer, use commercially prepared suet, place it in the shade, clean frequently, and return the suet to the fridge overnight.

Birdfeeder Bullies

Feeders can also attract some less welcome species. Whether because of their gluttonous appetite, excessive numbers, or simply unappreciated presence, certain creatures that take advantage of our generosity are often considered a nuisance. Some homeowners will go to great lengths to rid their yard of these pests. It helps to understand that all wildlife is merely acting as its instincts dictate. They are all there trying to fill their hunger — some are just more aggressive about it. Sometimes tolerance is in order. For more serious problems, examine your feeding strategy and consider the following tips:

- First determine what is attracting the problem species.
- Mixes with a high proportion of hulled oats, rice, peanut hearts, corn, millet, or wheat can bring in pests such as pigeons, starlings, and house sparrows.
- Shorten or remove perches from tubular feeders to give an advantage to smaller birds.
- Use specially adapted feeders — weight-sensitive or with a metal cage — to allow smaller birds to feed while keeping out most larger birds and squirrels.
- For the best chance at thwarting squirrels, place feeders on posts with a baffle underneath. Place the feeders at least 3 metres from launching points such as trees or fences.
- Use metal feeders to prevent chewing by squirrels.
- Don't place feeders over decks, where spilled seed can attract rodents.
- Store seed in rodent-proof containers.
- Use feeders with large trays or higher edges to keep feed from falling to the ground. Clean spilled seed from underneath feeders.
- Keep cats indoors. Domestic cats are predators that hunt instinctively even when not hungry. Free-roaming cats have a serious impact on bird populations and often take advantage of bird feeding areas.
- Place feeders and birdbaths farther than pouncing distance from dense shrubbery or other cat hiding places. But provide shelter, such as dense shrubs or

trees, just outside this distance as an escape from hunting hawks.

- For serious problems, it may be necessary to stop feeding for a while.
- Realize that limiting access for problem species may also hinder desirable species with similar feeding habits. Separating food types and feeders will help give smaller birds a chance to eat while still providing for other birds.

Maintenance

Bird feeders entail responsibility. Regular cleaning is important to ensure that they don't become a source of disease or contamination.

- Once you begin providing supplemental food for birds, continue to do so throughout the season.
- Clean off your bird feeders promptly during and after a snowfall. Make sure feeders are full of seed, especially after heavy snow or during icy-cold weather. (Small birds work very hard to stay warm and need more food than usual when the temperature falls below zero.)
- Keep your bird feeders clean and dry. Food can spoil easily when wet.
- Before refilling the feeder, clean the edges and discard any damp seed.
- Every few months (more often in hot weather), empty feeders and wash them with hot water and a stiff brush. Clean thoroughly, getting at all corners. Allow them to dry completely before refilling.
- Store seed in dry, sealed containers to prevent mould and access by rodents.
- Clean up under feeders regularly to prevent wet or contaminated seeds from accumulating.

Simple Feeders

- A string of peanuts hung from a branch looks scrumptious to a blue jay.

- Pine cones coated with a mix of cornmeal and suet can be hung from branches.
- A hanging log drilled with holes for suet makes a cheap, handy feeder that gets high ratings from birds as well.
- Upright corncobs on a board look scrumptious to squirrels.
- Recycled household items, such as empty milk cartons or two litre pop bottles, also make great feeders.
- If you build your own feeder, don't weatherproof it with preservatives, as most are poisonous.

If you follow these guidelines you should have good success in attracting and keeping birds. Don't get discouraged if birds don't come right away. Most people enjoy success by their second year, after reviewing the feeders and their location and making any necessary adjustments.

Once your feeders are operating, you'll discover how fun and rewarding they can be. A bird identification guide will help you recognize the many kinds of species that visit.

For more detailed information on planting for birds, attracting butterflies or other wildlife, composting, dealing with problem wildlife, and more, visit www.wildaboutgardening.org or call 1-800-563-9453 ext. 216



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Some Backyard Birds and Their Favourite Feeder Foods

	Cracked Corn	Fresh Fruit	Millet	Niger Seed	Peanut Hulled	Peanut in Shell	Suet	Sunflower Seed
American crow	X					X		
American goldfinch				X				X
Blue jay	X				X	X		X
Brown creeper							X	
Brown-headed cowbird	X		X					
Chickadee					X		X	X
Common grackle	X							X
Dark-eyed junco	X		X					Hulled
Gray jay							X	
Grosbeak								X
House finch				X				X
Mourning dove	X		X					Hulled
Northern cardinal								X
Northern flicker							X	
Northern mockingbird		X						
Nuthatch					X		X	X
Purple finch								X
Redpoll				X				X
Red-winged blackbird	X		X					X
Ruby-crowned kinglet							X	
Siskin				X				X
Sparrow	X		X					
Stellar's jay	X				X	X	X	X
Thrasher	X	X	X				X	
Towhee			X					
Waxwing		X						
Woodpecker							X	
Wren							X	