

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

For the Birds



Among the fondest and most memorable moments of childhood are the discoveries of songbirds nesting in the backyard. The distinctive, mud-lined nests of robins and their beautiful blue eggs captivate people of all ages. Likewise, the nesting activities of house wrens, cardinals, chickadees and other common birds can stimulate a lifelong interest in nature.

Introduction

As you learn to enjoy the beauty of birdlife around their home, you may wish to improve the "habitat" in your yard so that more birds will visit your property. You can attract birds by placing bird feeders, nest boxes, and bird baths in your yard, and by planting a variety of trees, shrubs, and flowers. These can provide good nesting sites, winter shelter, places to hide from predators and natural food supplies that are available year-round.

Backyard bird feeding is a convenient way to enjoy wildlife. More than 65 million Americans of all ages watch, feed and landscape for birds.

It doesn't matter where you live—in an apartment, townhouse or single family dwelling, in the city, suburbs or country. Just stand still and you'll hear them: wild birds. It is hard to imagine life without them.

Bird watching is one of the fastest growing forms of outdoor recreation in the country. Each year millions of people discover for the first time the joys of birdwatching. It's easy to understand why. Birds are fun to watch.

And you can watch them just about everywhere. The most convenient place to start is right in your own backyard. All it takes to get their attention is food or water, a place to build a nest and appropriate vegetation.



*photo:
Hollingsworth/USFWS*

Backyard Bird Feeding

When you want to attract a particular bird species and keep it coming back to your backyard, what you do will be determined by where you live, and the time of year. For example, on any winter day, you are likely to see a cardinal at a sunflower feeder in Virginia, a goldfinch at a thistle feeder in Illinois and hummingbirds at a nectar feeder in southern California.

A bird field guide has pictures of different birds and will help you find the names for the birds you're likely to see and the time of year you're most likely to see them. So, first determine what birds are likely to occur in your area.





Feeder Selection

When the ground is covered with snow and ice, it's hard to resist just tossing seed out the door. But it's healthier for the birds to get their handouts at a feeding station, rather than off the ground. Regardless of the season, food that sits on the ground for even a short time is exposed to contamination by dampness, mold, bacteria, animal droppings, lawn fertilizers and pesticides.

You can start simply with a piece of scrap wood elevated a few inches above the ground. Add a few holes for drainage and you've built a platform feeder. It won't be long before the birds find it.

There are several factors to consider after you've decided to feed birds in your backyard.

Placement

Where do you want to watch your birds? From a kitchen window...a sliding glass door opening onto a deck...a second-story window?

Pick a location that is easy to get to. When the weather is bad and birds are most vulnerable, you may be reluctant to fill a feeder that is not in a convenient spot near a door or an accessible window. Also, pick a site where discarded seed shells and bird droppings won't be a cleanup problem.



Put your feeder where the squirrels can't reach. Squirrels become a problem when they take over a bird feeder, scaring the birds away and tossing seed all over. Squirrels have been known to chew right through plastic and wooden feeders.

If you've seen squirrels in your neighborhood, it is safe to assume they will visit your feeder. Think long and hard before you hang anything from a tree limb. Squirrels are incredibly agile, and any feeder hanging from a tree is likely to become a squirrel feeder.



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 "house" type.

Photo: Kevin Tennyson, USDOJ

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 the squirrels. 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 (squirrels can jump great distances).

Durability

Bird feeders are made from a variety of materials. 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 well you maintain it, the effects of weather, and whether squirrels can get to it. Water can get into any feeder regardless of how carefully you protect it. Cloth, vinyl, nylon and metal netting feeders are inexpensive, but they do not protect your seed from spoiling in damp or wet weather. Improve them by adding a plastic dome.

Most wood, plastic, ceramic and solid metal feeders 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 that can mix with rainwater and be unhealthy for any animal. Look for shallow plate-like seed trays to catch dropped seeds while allowing spent seed shells to blow away.

When you feed birds, expect bird droppings and a leftover food mess. While you do not have to wash the feeder daily, you should clean it at least every few weeks. Diseases like salmonella can grow in moldy, wet seed and bird droppings in your feeder tray and on the ground below. Move your feeder a few feet each season to give the ground underneath time to assimilate the seed debris and bird droppings.

The maintenance required to keep your feeder clean varies according to the type of feeder. 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, but preferably two or three times a week. Sunflower and suet feeders need to be cleaned only once a month.

Plastic, ceramic and glass feeders are easy to clean. Wash them in a bucket of hot, soapy water fortified with a capful or two of chlorine bleach. 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) a day. Early in the season, hummers are territorial and won't share a feeder. A sixteen-ounce feeder can be wasteful, or even lethal, because artificial nectar (sugar water) can ferment in the hot summer sun. A two-ounce feeder is more than enough for one hummer. Increase the size of your feeder depending on your location and how many hummers you see in your yard.



If you opt for a large-volume seed feeder, 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 become a problem, you can control their numbers by putting out smaller amounts of seed, or by using specialty seeds or restrictive feeders that will attract only certain species. If you fill your feeder only when it's empty, the birds will look for food elsewhere.

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

The most non-selective feeders are the tray, platform or house feeders because they allow easy access by all birds.

Tube feeders without trays also restrict access to only small birds. Remove the perches, and you've further restricted the feeder to only those birds that can easily cling—finches, chickadees, titmice and woodpeckers.

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

You can virtually eliminate visits by birds you would rather not see by offering seeds they won't eat. 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.

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.



Many birds prefer sunflower. Some prefer millet. A few prefer peanuts. Sparrows, blackbirds, doves and juncos will eat the other grains used in pre-made mixes: corn, milo, red millet, oats, wheat and canary seed. Birds will also kick out artificial “berry” pellets, processed seed flavored and colored to look like real fruit.

Black oil sunflower is the hands-down favorite of all the birds that visit tube and house feeders. Birds who visit platform feeders (doves and sparrows) favor white proso millet. Ducks, geese and quail will eat corn. Many cereal grains (corn, milo, oats, canary, wheat, rape, flax and buckwheat) in mixed bird seeds are NOT favorites of birds that visit tube feeders.

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

a starling-resistant suet feeder

a house feeder for sunflower

a bluebird feeder

a wire mesh cage feeder for peanut

a nectar feeder

a tube feeder for thistle

a stationary or tray fruit feeder

a house or platform feeder for millet

Suet Feeder



Thistle Feeder



Feeding Tray



Nut Feeder



Birds Attracted by Various Feeders and Foods

| | | |
|--|---|---|
| <i>Tube Feeder with Black Oil Sunflower</i> | goldfinches chickadees woodpeckers nuthatches | titmice redpolls pine siskins |
| <i>...Adding a Tray to the Tube Feeder Will Also Attract</i> | cardinals jays crossbills purple finches house finches | white-throated sparrows white-crowned sparrows |
| <i>Tray or Platform Feeder—with Millet</i> | doves house sparrows blackbirds juncos cowbirds towhees | white-throated sparrows tree sparrows white-crowned sparrows chipping sparrows |
| <i>Tray or Platform Feeder—with Corn</i> | starlings house sparrows grackles jays juncos bobwhite quail | doves ring-necked pheasants white-throated sparrows |
| <i>Platform Feeder or Tube Feeder and Tray—with Peanuts</i> | cardinals grackles titmice starlings jays | |
| <i>Niger Thistle Feeder with Tray</i> | goldfinches house finches purple finches redpolls pine siskins doves | chickadees song sparrows dark-eyed juncos white-throated sparrows |
| <i>Nectar Feeder</i> | hummingbirds orioles cardinals tanagers | woodpeckers finches thrushes |

Fruit

orioles
tanagers
mockingbirds
bluebirds
thrashers
cardinals
woodpeckers

jays
starlings
thrushes
cedar waxwings
yellow-breasted
chats

*Hanging Suet
Feeder*

woodpeckers
wrens
chickadees
nuthatches
kinglets

thrashers
creepers
cardinals
starlings

*Peanut Butter
Suet*

woodpeckers
goldfinches
juncos
cardinals
thrushes

jays
kinglets
bluebirds
wrens
starlings

*Hanging Peanut
Feeder*

woodpeckers
chickadees
titmice

Uninvited Guests at the Birdfeeder

Once you get your bird feeding station up and running, you may run into problems with two kinds of uninvited guests—those interested in the seeds (squirrels and chipmunks, rats and mice, and starlings and house sparrows), and those interested in eating a bird for dinner (cats and hawks).



When a squirrel is at the feeder, you're not likely to see birds. Squirrels will scare off the birds while they eat the seed and sometimes they will eat the feeder too. The simplest solution is a squirrel-proof feeder or pole.

Starlings and house sparrows are not native to North America and are aggressive towards other species. Choose your feeder and seed to exclude these species if possible.

Chipmunks, rats and mice can also become a problem where there is seed spillage under the feeder. Don't use mixed bird seed, and if you don't have a squirrel problem, add a feeder tray.

Feral cats and your neighbor's tabby are a serious threat to many birds. Keep feeders away from brushpiles and shrubbery, as this offers cats the necessary cover to surprise birds.

If there are no cats in your neighborhood and you find a pile of feathers near your feeder, look for a full-bellied hawk perching on a tree nearby. Don't put out poisons or try to trap hawks though, as this is against state and federal law.

Questions about Feeding Wild Birds

When is the best time to start?

Usually, whenever the weather is severe, birds will appreciate a reliable supplemental food source. In northern areas, start before the onset of cold weather so birds have time to find the feeder.

When's the best time to stop?

Although you can feed birds year-round, especially with fruit and nectar, you can stop feeding seeds once a reliable supply of insects is available in the spring.

Is it best to stop feeding hummingbirds after Labor Day?

There is no evidence that feeding hummers after Labor Day will delay migration. Still, feeders in areas with sub-freezing winter weather should be removed shortly after that holiday. Tempting hummers to remain beyond normal departure dates is ill-advised.

How long does it take for birds to find a feeder?

It may take more time for birds to find window feeders than hanging or pole-mounted feeders. You may want to wrap aluminum foil around the top of the feeder hanger. Sometimes all it takes is the reflection of light on the foil to catch their attention.

My feeder is full of seeds. I haven't seen a bird in months. Am I doing something wrong?

When birds desert your feeder, it may be simply that a lot of natural food is available nearby. Or something may be wrong, such as spoiled seeds or a contaminated feeder. Throw the seeds away and wash the feeder. Look at where your feeder is placed. Be sure it's not vulnerable to predators. At the same time, make sure it is not in an open area, away from the cover in which birds usually travel.

Will birds' feet stick to metal feeders and perches in the wet winter weather?

Birds don't have sweat glands in their feet, so they won't freeze onto metal feeders. There's no need to cover any metal feeders parts with plastic or wood to protect birds' feet, tongues or eyes.

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