

# Feed Wild Birds

*E. Henning and N. Allen*

Feeding wild birds has become one of America's favorite hobbies. It's easy to attract birds to your yard, and there are many different ways to do so. The most common way is to put out bird feeders for them. Many wild birds such as chickadees, nuthatches, juncos, finches, and jays are regular visitors to feeders in urban areas.

## Types of food

You can buy many types of wild bird foods. They usually consist of whole and shelled seeds that are packaged as a single type or in a variety of mixtures.

Different seeds attract different species of birds (see Table 1, page 2). If you're just getting started with a bird-feeding project, you might want to experiment to see which birds are in your area. Start by putting out a seed mix in an open place and see which kinds of birds you attract. Observe which seeds are wasted or pushed aside. Once birds have started coming to your yard, it is easier to lure them to separate feeding stations.

Avoid seed mixes that contain only a small amount of sunflower seeds. These mixes can be wasteful and messy. Commercial wild



*Figure 1.* Tube feeder with perch. Illustration courtesy of Wild Birds Unlimited, Inc.

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**Table 1. Common backyard birds and foods they like.**

Bird	Sunflower seeds	White millet	Nyjer	Peanuts	Suet
Chickadee	X*			X	X
House finch/Purple finch	X*	X	X		
Sparrows	X	X*	X	X	X
Jays	X			X	X
American goldfinch	X	X	X*		
Dark-eyed junco	X	X*	X	X	X
Spotted towhee	X*	X		X	
Bushtit					X
Downy/Hairy woodpecker	X				X
Nuthatches	X*			X	X
Mourning dove	X	X*		X	
Quail		X*			
Crow/Raven				X	
Varied thrush		X			X

\* Indicates favorite seed choice

birdseed mixes usually contain a lot of milo or millet, which most wild birds don't eat. Millet seed and milo also can attract unwanted species such as starlings, English sparrows, and rodents.

Specialty stores sell seed mixes that contain common birds' favorite types of food. If you want to attract a large variety of birds with one product, try a specialty mix. Otherwise, use single types of foods at separate feeding stations (see "Types of bird feeders," page 4).

### **Sunflower seeds**

Black oil sunflower seeds are the most popular food for wild birds that use feeders. Sunflower seeds are the favorite food for many birds that use perches (called **perching** birds) such as chickadees, nuthatches, purple finches, evening grosbeaks, and white-crowned sparrows.

### **White proso millet**

Some species that feed on or near the ground, such as juncos, sparrows, doves, and quail, will eat white proso millet.

### **Nyjer seed**

Nyjer or niger seed (sometimes called thistle) and sunflower chips are favorite seeds for many finches. Goldfinches and pine siskins prefer nyjer, especially during spring through fall. Some people like to mix sunflower chips with nyjer for a "finch mix" type food that can be used all year. Nyjer is expensive, but special feeders allow the birds to access only one seed at a time, which helps prevent waste.

### **Peanuts**

Peanuts, either kernels or in the shell, are attractive to jays, chickadees, and nuthatches. They also attract squirrels.

Use roasted peanuts only. Raw peanuts contain toxins that could be harmful to birds and other animals.

## **Suet**

Another popular food item is **suet**. Suet is fat processed from domestic cows and sheep. Suet attracts many insect-eating birds that need animal fat for energy. This is most important during the winter months, when insects are not readily available. Woodpeckers, chickadees, bushtits, and nuthatches are especially fond of suet.

You can buy suet cakes at specialty stores, but they are simple to make at home. You usually can get suet from a meat market or large grocery store.

### **Homemade suet cakes**

1. Heat to boiling 1 part suet and 6 parts water.
2. Add 2 parts cornmeal and ½ part flour.
3. Allow the mixture to cool. Pour into molds to make 1½-inch cakes, and allow to harden. Cupcake tins, butter tubs, or square freezer containers work well as molds.
4. Store in freezer.
  - You can add peanut butter, lard, or vegetable shortening to the mix, or use one of them as a substitute for the suet.
  - You also can add birdseed, chopped nuts, oatmeal, or chopped fruit to the recipe.
  - Do not use suet and other fats during hot weather, because they will spoil.

## **Grit and eggshells**

Many birds use grit to help them digest their food. In areas where snow covers the ground in the winter, birds may benefit from a small tray of sand.

Crushed eggshells provide calcium, which female birds need during the nesting

season. To prepare eggshells, clean them and then dry them in the oven at 200°F for 1 hour to prevent salmonella poisoning. Crush the shells into small pieces and put them on a tray or platform near your feeders.

## **Foods to avoid**

Do not feed birds bakery goods such as bread, donuts, cookies, or crackers. These do not provide the nutrition birds need. They mold easily, and birds can get sick and die from eating moldy food. Also, bakery goods can attract unwanted species such as starlings, rats, and mice.

## **Storage**

Store bird food in a hard plastic or metal resealable container. This helps keep the food dry and keeps out mice and rats. (Rodents easily can chew through a paper or plastic bag.) A 5-gallon container with a tight-fitting lid stored on a shelf is ideal.

## **When to feed**

Winter (usually from October through April) is the ideal season to feed birds, because their natural foods are not abundant. By providing food for wildlife during severe cold weather, you can help them get enough food to maintain sufficient body heat. Feeding during the summer months is not as important, because their natural food is readily available. But, some birds will visit your feeders year-round.

Birds usually do not depend on only one feeder for their survival. It is more likely that they feed from several sources each day. But, once you start a winter feeding program, be sure to continue until spring when the birds' natural foods are more abundant.

Bird feeders do not prevent birds from migrating. Migrating birds can benefit from feeders, especially in the fall and spring.

## Types of bird feeders

Bird feeders come in various shapes and sizes. Some feeders are very specialized for a certain type of food, such as those for hummingbirds (see EC 1541, *Attract Hummingbirds to Your Garden*).

### Tube feeders

Tube feeders commonly are used for nyjer and sunflower seeds (Figure 1, page 1). These feeders have several perches so many birds can feed at the same time. Since the birds take one seed at a time at their own feeding ports, there usually is less waste. Some tube feeders also have a tray under them to catch spilled seeds.

### Hopper feeders

Hopper feeders have a container, or **hopper**, that releases seed as birds eat it (Figure 2). They often are used for sunflower seeds. Hopper feeders hold a large amount of birdseed, and they accommodate many types of birds. But, they can be messy and may need to be cleaned more often than tube feeders.

It's best not to use seed mixes in hopper feeders. Mixes encourage overcrowding at your feeder. This also can be wasteful, because birds will scatter other seeds in search of their favorites.

### Platform feeders

Platform feeders usually are placed near the ground. They offer an open area for ground-feeding birds that enjoy white millet and some seed mixes.

These feeders have two problems: (1) undesirable species may be attracted to them, and (2) birds are more vulnerable to

predators. Cover the platform feeder with 1½-inch wire mesh to exclude large birds, cats, or other mammals (Figure 3). Smaller birds can get in, but larger birds and animals cannot.

### Suet feeders

A suet feeder usually is a wire cage in which you place a block of suet. Some hang upside down, which discourages starlings but allows other birds to feed. Others have a board that extends below the feeder to serve as a tail prop for woodpeckers (Figure 4).

Many suet feeders are designed to exclude larger birds such as jays, crows, starlings, and magpies as well as raccoons. If these species are not a problem, you can spread suet on pinecones or in knots in trees.



Figure 2. Hopper feeder.  
Illustration courtesy of Wild Birds Unlimited, Inc.

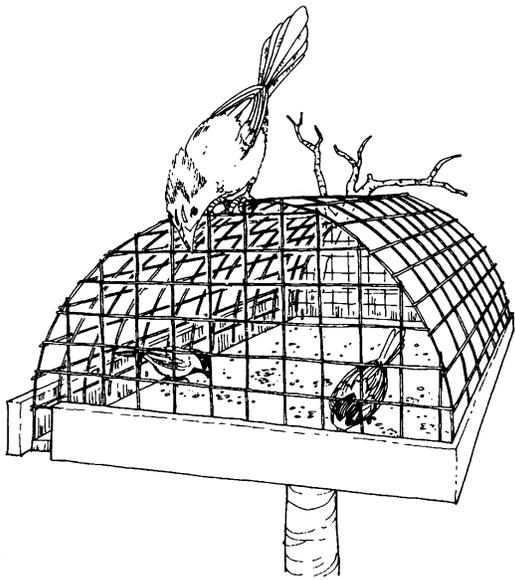


Figure 3. Platform feeder with cage.  
From: *Landscaping for Wildlife in the Pacific Northwest*, University of Washington Press and Washington Department of Wildlife.



Figure 4. Suet feeder with tail prop.  
Illustration courtesy of Wild Birds Unlimited, Inc.

## Where to place your feeders

You can hang feeders, mount them on poles, or attach them to a window. Place feeders in a quiet, undisturbed area, away from noisy traffic, pets, and household doors, and out of strong winds.

Birds often like to fly to a perch before landing on a feeder. They are more likely to use feeders that are near other perches, such as a dead tree, a branch, other vegetation, a pole, or another manmade structure. You can create perches by placing dead branches or sticks in the ground or attaching them to fences.

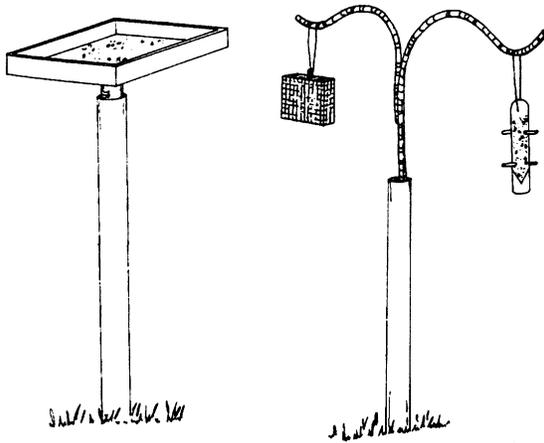
Specialty poles made for hanging bird feeders include perches for birds. They can be placed almost anywhere and are less likely to attract squirrels.

Feeders hung on tree branches provide natural perches. But, squirrels easily can get to them there. Shields can help (see “Protect your feeders,” page 6), but squirrels often jump on the feeder from below the shield.

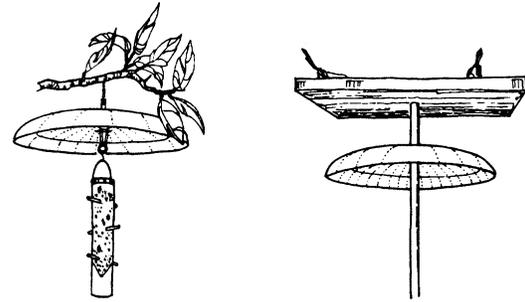
The important thing is to put your feeder where a cat cannot ambush birds and squirrels cannot jump to it. Place your feeders 5 to 6 feet off the ground and about 6 to 8 feet from nearby vegetation. You might need to put your feeder in a few different places before you find the right one.

Be sure there is escape cover for the birds within 10 feet of feeders. Planting shrubs or dense foliage or creating a brush pile will provide shelter from many predators and stormy weather and may even provide nesting habitat.

Bird feeders can be messy. Place feeders over a hard surface, such as cement, that is easy to clean. Or, put a tray underneath your feeder just above the ground to catch the fallen seeds and allow ground-feeding birds to eat them. Shelled seeds are more expensive, but you won't have the mess of seed shells under your feeder.



*Figure 5. Squirrel-proof posts.*  
 From: *Landscaping for Wildlife in the Pacific Northwest*, University of Washington Press and Washington Department of Wildlife.



*Figure 6. Umbrella shields.*  
 From: *Landscaping for Wildlife in the Pacific Northwest*, University of Washington Press and Washington Department of Wildlife.

## Protect your feeders

Jays intimidate other birds at feeders and spill much of the food in search of the bigger seeds. Some feeders have a weighted bar that prevents larger, heavier birds, such as jays, from eating the seeds. When a heavy bird lands on the bar, it closes the lid, and the bird cannot get the seeds.

Squirrels can climb almost anything, including narrow poles. But, they may be thwarted by a smooth pole that is too big for them to wrap their feet around. Put a metal or PVC tube that is at least 5 inches in diameter around the pole on which a feeder is mounted (Figure 5).

You can use an umbrella shield, or **baffle**, to discourage squirrels and other animals. Place it above the feeder (which also protects the feeder from rain) or beneath it (Figure 6).

## Keep the feeder clean

It is important to clean your feeders so you don't spread salmonella and other avian

diseases. Please be sure to follow the instructions below.

- Have on hand a bottlebrush, white vinegar, a putty knife, and stiff-bristled brushes as cleaning tools.
- Clean all types of bird feeders regularly, inside and out. Clean them twice a month or once a week during high use.
- Scrape bird droppings and old food off feeders. Rinse or wipe clean with a disinfectant solution of 1 part vinegar to 20 parts water. Allow feeders to dry before refilling.
- To prevent mold, keep feeders and birdseed dry. If your feeder is not protected from rain, put out only enough food for 1 or 2 days.
- Move feeders to different spots to prevent buildup of wasted seed on the ground. Or, clean up under feeders regularly.
- If you use a tray to catch seeds underneath feeders, make sure to clean out the tray daily if it is exposed to rain.
- If you find sick or dead birds near your feeder, take it down immediately, discard

the food, and clean it thoroughly. Wait 2 or 3 weeks, and then put it up in a new spot.

- If you find an injured or sick bird, call your local wildlife rescue center for advice.

Attracting wild birds to your yard with feeders offers hours of enjoyment. Watching their behavior and feeding habits is a great way to get children interested in nature. Children also might enjoy the responsibility of helping to clean and refill feeders.

Many bird watchers keep a journal or bird checklist of all the birds that visit their yard. Photographing or drawing them is also a great way to record the beauty and diversity of the many bird species you might see. But most important is the delight of knowing you are helping your “little feathered friends.”

## For more information

### **OSU Extension publications**

See these other publications in The Wildlife Garden set:

*Attract Hummingbirds to Your Garden*,  
EC 1541 (2002).

*Attract Reptiles and Amphibians to Your Yard*,  
EC 1542 (2002).

*Create a Garden Pond for Wildlife*, EC 1548  
(2002).

*Create a Butterfly Garden*, EC 1549 (2002).

*Create Roosts for Bats in Your Yard*, EC 1555  
(2002).

*Build Nest Boxes for Wild Birds*, EC 1556  
(2002).

*Reduce Deer Damage in Your Yard*, EC 1557  
(2002).

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### **Other publications**

Hirose, J., M. McPhee, P. Van Vlack, and S. Weston. 1992. *Naturescaping: A Place for Wildlife*. Portland General Electric, Portland, Oregon.

Link, Russell. 1999. *Landscaping for Wildlife in the Pacific Northwest*. University of Washington Press, Seattle and London, in association with the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Shalaway, Scott. 2000. *Building a Backyard Bird Habitat*. Stackpole Books, Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania.

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