

BIRDFEEDING BASICS

Feeding birds in winter, while not necessary for survival (birds are equipped to survive winter weather without human assistance), can provide them with an edge during severe weather. Furthermore, observing the antics of our feathered friends at feeders can provide hours of delight! Let's face it, feeding the birds in our yard is more for us than it is for them. And in this case, as opposed to so many other instances of human "interference" when it comes to wildlife, if done properly, there is nothing wrong with providing them with that extra boost!



When feeding wild birds, make sure you feed high quality seed for maximum nutrition and energy. To attract the most species, black oil sunflower seed is best. Peanut chips are a nice supplement to sunflower seeds, providing a great source of fat and energy. This mix attracts nuthatches, cardinals, woodpeckers, chickadees, tufted titmice and house finches. Try not to feed the cheaper mixes, as this will attract unwanted, non-native house sparrows and starlings. In addition, nyjer seed in a thistle feeder will be devoured by goldfinches. Finally, birds love suet, which provides a concentrated source of fatty energy. Suet should always be hung so that critters other than birds cannot get to it.

In addition to these basics, you can provide your feathered friends with safflower seed (Cardinals enjoy it. Squirrels do not!) and mixes containing seeds such as millet (juncos, Carolina wrens and mourning doves enjoy millet when sprinkled on the ground). Try to avoid the cheap mixes that contains a lot of milo, a seed commonly used as a filler. If you want to avoid a mess, do what I do-feed the birds sunflower hearts (I make my own mix of sunflower chips and peanut chips). Yes, the chips are more expensive, but definitely worth it if you want to avoid shells on the ground. I have noticed that the goldfinches at my feeders actually prefer sunflower chips to nyjer, so this is a good option all around.





To attract a variety of birds, different types of feeders should be purchased. Unless you want to be eaten out of house and home, squirrel proof feeders are a wise investment. For a basic set up I suggest a hopper feeder, nyjer feeder and suet cage. Additionally, one can add a platform feeder close to the ground to attract birds such as sparrows, doves and juncos as well as a tube feeder for smaller birds.

It is vital that you provide a safe, hygienic feeding station for your avian guests. Please make sure that feeders are either at least 30 feet away or within 3 feet of windows to avoid deadly collisions, and make sure that there is cover nearby for the birds to retreat into. In addition, feeders need to be kept clean in order to prevent diseases from spreading through the local population. Avian conjunctivitis is a deadly disease which affects finches and it can easily be prevented by good hygiene.



At least once a month, empty and clean your feeders with a mix of water and bleach. Please be sure to dry thoroughly before refilling.



If you follow these guidelines, you will be treated to a delightful array of bird visitors all winter long. You may even find yourself entertaining more than just the "usuals". Through most of January and February 2014 a very tame pine warbler visited my feeders each day. I also was very lucky to discover something even more special than my pine warbler. After hearing a fuss on my deck one night that winter, I discovered a southern flying squirrel having his way

with the feeders! This was a squirrel species I was NOT going to try to deter! For about two months, this adorable creature came in for his nightly buffet. He became so tame that I was able to stand within a foot or so and watch in awe as he ate the pecans I put out each night (yes, I found myself leaving extra special treats for this extra special guest). As the weather warmed, he found a mate and alas, they moved off. During the winter of 2014-2015 I hosted three flying squirrels at my feeder!



Is there a specific time to take the feeders down? No, not really. I generally take my feeders down once the grackles come back, because they can empty a feeder in a day, but hang them out again in mid to late summer to attract young of the year. This summer my feeding station was an Avian Romper Room with baby chickadees, house finches, Carolina wrens, red bellied woodpeckers and cardinals all vying for space at Stella's All-You-Can-Eat—Birdy Buffet!

Providing extra energy and nutrition for your feathered friends is a rewarding experience for both humans and birds alike. With these tips, you too can enjoy the delightful antics of your feathered visitors.

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