

It's Time to Feed the Birds

by Rachel Oppedahl

One essential element in creating a healthy garden is providing for birds. Because they need high-fat, calorie-rich foods to get through winter (and for some, migration), this is a great time for gardeners to offer supplemental food. It's also a perfect time to curl up with gardening books and make plans for a more bird-friendly garden year-round.

You'll be in good company if you focus on our feathered friends now. February is National Bird-Feeding Month, and the Audubon Society's Great Backyard Bird Count occurs February 13 through 16.

Here are some tips for offering supplemental food and planning a garden that feeds birds all year.

Add to Their Winter Menu

Many of the birds we see most often in the foothills—robins, chickadees, titmice, nuthatches, juncos, Steller's jays—have a diet that's heavy on insects, but more so in spring and summer as they feed their young. You can supplement birds' cold-season menu by keeping these things in mind:

- Rely on a high-quality birdseed mix that will attract the widest variety of birds. Avoid cheap mixes that are predominantly millet or grain byproducts, and look for high-fat content blends that have the most black-oil sunflower, safflower and/or Niger seeds. You can keep squirrels from raiding your bird diners by purchasing squirrel-proof feeders, or by filling unprotected feeders with only safflower seeds, which squirrels (and bossy birds like blackbirds) don't particularly like. Speaking of bird-feeder marauders, keep the aggressive jays away by providing them with a bowl full of raw peanuts in another part of the garden.
- Different birds prefer to feed at different levels in the garden, so scatter some seeds on the ground (think robins, towhees), put some in hanging tubes or socks and some in platform or hopper feeders affixed to trees or garden posts.
- Birds are always on the lookout for predators, so place feeders near trees or bushes where they will have a ready escape and a perch to watch from until the coast is clear.
- In addition to seeds, other winter treats include orange halves, jelly, and store-bought or homemade suet (beef or sheep fat mixed with a variety of seeds, fruit, etc.). The National Wildlife Federation has a fun, homemade suet "ornament" project on their website: <http://www.nwf.org/kids/family-fun/crafts/suet->

[ornaments.aspx](#).

- Keep your feeders clean. Wet weather promotes mold and mildew, so empty and scrub out your bird feeders often.

Make Plans for a Bird-Friendly Garden

Take some time now, while there aren't so many garden chores, to research and make a list of plants to add to your garden to attract more birds year-round. Here are some tips:

- Because insects normally make up the bulk of backyard bird diets, if you create a diverse garden with a lot of natives, you will draw a healthy assortment of insects that birds love to eat.
- Grow hardy perennials that form appetizing seed heads for birds: coneflower, black-eyed Susan, coreopsis and seed-bearing foothill natives.
- One often overlooked category of garden plants that offers backyard and migratory birds much-needed "fuel," especially in fall and winter, is berry-producing shrubs and groundcovers. Here are some of the best berry-rich plants: California holly (Toyon), American cranberry viburnum, dogwood, California coffeeberry, serviceberry, winterberry, crabapple, highbush blueberry, groundcover bunchberry, and certain elderberries.

One of the benefits of attracting more birds to your garden is the sheer pleasure of watching them. The Cornell Lab Project Feeder Watch has a great website that provides food and feeder preferences for nearly 100 common North American birds: <http://feederwatch.org/learn/common-feeder-birds/>. To learn more about the Great Backyard Bird Count, visit <http://birds.audubon.org/great-backyard-bird-count>.

Rachel Oppedahl is a University of California Master Gardener of Tuolumne County who especially loves Steller's jays, even though they are noisy rascals.