



## Discourage Rats when Encouraging Birdlife

by Neil Fernbaugh and Patti Phillips, UC Master Gardeners

One of the joys of having a garden is watching the incredible variety of birdlife. We have designed our garden to provide food, water and habitat. In recent months, as we've added even more native and drought tolerant plantings, we've noticed new species we'd never seen here before.

Unfortunately, we occasionally are plagued with the wrong kind of wildlife, since our property is surrounded by orange groves. Varmints like rats, along with squirrels and an occasional possum or raccoon family, love oranges. Rats, of course, are everywhere there are people. Some people seem to think that birdfeeders are a big part of the problem. Generally, this is not the case, but rats are a problem in our neighborhoods, and there are some relatively simple things all of us can do to reduce their populations.

Rats and other problem animals need shelter. Getting rid of hiding and nesting sites is a first priority. Dense ground covers (especially ivy) and shrubbery, firewood and debris piles, all provide the kind of cover animals seek. Cleaning up such areas should be the first line of defense.

Second, rats and other varmints are attracted to odors and smells from barbeque grills and grilling residues, as well as outdoor pet food bowls, unpicked fruit on trees, and garden waste. Compost pits can attract rats as well. Keeping barbeques, garbage bins, and other potential attractive food sources covered or stored securely will really help. Making sure to pick up left-over pet food before nightfall or feeding our pets inside is equally helpful.

For those of us who feed birds, here is a simple checklist of things we can do to insure that we are feeding the birds we love, and not the rats, possums, and skunks that cause us so many problems:

- Never feed birdlife by scattering food on the ground.
- Use feeders that are equipped with trays that limit seed being spilled on the ground. Local bird stores and even some local feed and hardware stores sell inexpensive trays and feeders that include baffles to keep varmints away from feeders.
- Hang feeders from poles that animals cannot climb, or make sure feeders are hung far enough away from roofs, fences, and branches so that rats and squirrels can't jump onto the feeders from nearby perches.



We repurposed an old plastic lampshade into a baffle for one of our feeders at the ranch.



A commercially available baffle  
*Courtesy wild birds unlimited*

- In the winter time, feed birds with suet cages that don't drop seeds to the ground, and in summer, when the suet could turn rancid, spread a mix of peanut butter and seed on a pinecone or other hanging device that the birds, but not rats, can get to.
- And lastly, choose feeds that are less likely to end up on the ground. Sunflower chips, and blends that are more or less waste free are much better than the cheap brands of birdseed.

There are a number of resources available online for those who want to learn more. Audubon, the National Wildlife Federation, other birding websites, and stores like Wild Birds Unlimited, are great places to learn more about proper feeding and care of wildlife. The California drought means that wildlife will become more reliant on humans for food and water, so we all need to be a little more careful that we aren't encouraging the varmints over our feathered friends.

July 2, 2015