

## Bird Feeding Basics

### Choosing a Feeder

Following are a variety of feeders to accommodate specific types of birds and their diets. Choosing more than one will help attract more species and avoid feeder congestion.

#### Ground feeders

These simple screen-bottomed trays typically sit several inches off the ground or your deck and help to keep grain or seeds and bird droppings from coming in contact with each other. Some feeders have covers to keep out snow; others may have wire mesh to keep out squirrels and large birds like crows. Ground feeding tables should be placed in open areas at least 10 feet from the nearest tree or shrub to give birds a chance to flee predators. Doves, juncos, sparrows, towhees, goldfinches and cardinals are all likely to visit ground feeders. Avoid using ground feeders if cats are likely to pounce from nearby shrubs.

#### Sunflower-seed tube feeders

If you are going to put out just one feeder, this is your best choice. Be sure to select a model with metal ports around the seed dispensers to protect the feeder from nibbling squirrels and house sparrows. Hang the feeder at least five feet off the ground and try to position it near a window where you can enjoy the visitors, which are likely to include chickadees, titmice, nuthatches, goldfinches, siskins and purple and house finches.

#### Suet feeder

Suet is popular with titmice, chickadees, nuthatches and woodpeckers. Wrens, creepers and warblers will also occasionally peck at suet. While you can hang suet chunks in a mesh onion bag, you can also purchase cage feeders. Some people like to make their own suet "puddings" by grinding the suet and adding seeds, and create homemade suet feeders by packing the mixture into the crevices of large pine cones. Suet feeders can be hung from trees, from poles near other feeders, or from a wire stretched between trees. Avoid feeding suet when temperatures rise into the 80-degree range, as it can turn rancid.

#### Hopper feeders

Hopper feeders keep several lbs of mixed seed dry and ready for hungry birds. Birds hopping on the feeder trigger the release of seeds. Hopper feeders should be positioned on a pole about five feet off the ground and will draw all the species that tube feeders attract, along with larger birds like jays, grackles, red-winged blackbirds and cardinals.

#### Thistle (nyjer) feeder

Especially designed to dispense thistle (nyjer) seed, these feeders have tiny holes that make the seed available only to small-beaked finches such as goldfinches, redpolls and pine siskins. Hang your thistle feeder from a tree or place it on a five-foot pole near other feeders. Squirrel baffles will help to protect the feeder.

### Feeder Location

**Location, Location, Location!** There are a few key points to consider when deciding where to put your feeder. You want to think about things like avoiding competition and accommodating various feeding styles and preferences. You also want to think of possible hazards to the birds, such as window collisions, prowling cats, and thieving squirrels. Follow these tips to provide an ideal environment in your backyard.

**Locate feeders at different levels.** Sparrows, juncos, and towhees usually feed on the ground, while finches and cardinals feed in shrubs, and chickadees, titmice, and woodpeckers feed in trees. To avoid crowding and attract the greatest variety of species, provide table-like feeders for ground feeding birds, hopper or tube feeders for shrub and treetop feeders, and suet feeders well off the ground for woodpeckers, nuthatches, and chickadees.

**Protect birds from window collisions.** Mobiles and opaque decorations hanging outside windows help to prevent bird strikes, or attach fruit tree netting outside windows to deflect birds from the glass.

**Keep cats indoors.** Cats kill hundreds of millions of birds annually in the U.S., often pouncing on ground-feeding birds and those dazed by window collisions. Responsible and caring cat owners keep their cats indoors, where they

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are also safer from traffic, disease, and fights with other animals. Outdoor cats are especially dangerous to birds in the spring when fledglings are on the ground. Bells on cat collars are usually ineffective for deterring predation

## Selecting Seeds

Different birds are attracted by different kinds of seed, so offer a variety in separate feeders. Make sure that the seed is compatible with both the feeder and the birds you hope to attract. Check out the home-made recipes below.

### Sunflower seed

Black-oil seed is the preferred seed of many small feeder birds, especially in northern latitudes. Striped sunflower seed is also readily eaten, especially by large-beaked birds. Hulled sunflower seed is consumed by the greatest variety of birds; it attracts jays, red-bellied woodpeckers, finches, goldfinches, northern cardinals, evening grosbeaks, pine grosbeaks, chickadees, titmice, nuthatches, and grackles.

### Millet

White millet is the favorite food of most small-beaked ground-feeding birds; red millet is also readily eaten. Millet attracts quail, doves, juncos, sparrows, towhees, cowbirds, and red-winged blackbirds.

### Cracked corn

Medium cracked corn is about as popular with ground-feeding birds as millet, but it is vulnerable to rot, since the interior of the kernel readily soaks up moisture. Feed small amounts, mixed with millet, on feeding tables or from watertight hopper feeders. Avoid fine cracked corn, since it quickly turns to mush; coarse cracked corn is too large for small-beaked birds. Cracked corn attracts pheasants, quail, doves, crows, jays, sparrows, juncos, and towhees.

### Milo, wheat, oats

These agricultural products are frequently mixed into low-priced birdseed blends. Most birds discard them in favor of other food, which leaves them to accumulate under feeders, where they may attract rodents. Milo is more often eaten by ground-feeding birds in the Southwest. It attracts pheasants, quail, and doves.

### Thistle (nyjer)

A preferred food of American goldfinches, lesser goldfinches, house finches, and common redpolls, nyjer is sometimes called "black gold," because it costs about \$1.50 per pound. Do not confuse it with prickly thistle, a pink-flowered weed used by goldfinches to line their nests.

### Suet feeding

Suet (beef fat) attracts insect-eating birds such as woodpeckers, wrens, chickadees, nuthatches, and titmice. Place the suet in special feeders or net onion bags at least five feet from the ground to keep it out of the reach of dogs. Although suet is particularly helpful during cold weather and migration when birds need extra fat reserves, "no melt" suet cakes are now available for use in warmer weather.

### Peanuts

Whole and crushed peanuts attract woodpeckers, jays, chickadees, titmice, bushtits, nuthatches, brown creepers, wrens, kinglets, northern mockingbirds, brown thrashers, starlings, and yellow-rumped and pine warblers. Provide these in tube-shaped, metal mesh feeders.

### Follow these tips and recipes below for a home-made addition to bird seeds.

**Peanut butter pudding:** Peanut butter is a good substitute for suet in the summer. Mix one part peanut butter with five parts corn meal and stuff the mixture into holes drilled in a hanging log or into the crevices of a large pinecone. This all-season mixture attracts woodpeckers, chickadees, titmice, and occasionally warblers.

**Fruit for berry-eating birds:** Fruit specialists such as robins, waxwings, bluebirds, and mockingbirds rarely eat birdseed. To attract these birds, soak raisins and currants in water overnight, then place them on a table feeder, or

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purchase blends with a dried fruit mixture. To attract orioles and tanagers, skewer halved oranges onto a spike near other feeders, or provide nectar feeders.

**Nectar for hummingbirds:** Make a sugar solution of one part white sugar to four parts water. Boil briefly to sterilize and dissolve sugar crystals; no need to add red food coloring. Feeders must be washed every few days with very hot water and kept scrupulously clean to prevent the growth of mold.

## Anti-Squirrel Safeguards

Squirrels are a notorious nuisance for birds and the people trying to feed them. These rascals have uncanny acrobatic abilities and a seemingly unstoppable determination. Follow these three simple steps to spend less time chasing these persistent pests and more time birding from your backyard.

**Exclude them:** Squirrels are best excluded by placing feeders on a pole in an open area, at least five feet off the ground and as far as possible from your house and nearby trees; keep in mind that squirrels can jump as far as six feet.

**Baffle them:** A popular method is to attach a baffle or deterrent to the feeder pole. You can buy special squirrel baffles, or you can attach an inverted sheet metal cone at least 18 inches in diameter. PVC pipe or stovepipe at least 6 inches in diameter and 18 inches long works as well. If your feeder is suspended from a horizontal wire, old record albums, CDs, or plastic soda bottles threaded onto the wire can keep the bushy-tailed rodents from tightrope walking over to it.

**Distract them:** Why not provide them with their own feeders? Stocked with blends that are especially attractive to squirrels and chipmunks, this will reduce competition for high-priced foods offered at bird feeders. The squirrel feeder to the right has a corn ear holder that once outfitted with an ear of corn, will keep them well fed and busy. Locate squirrel feeders far from bird feeders to avoid them crossing over.

## Feeder Maintenance

Cleaning birdfeeders and birdbaths is a crucial practice in preventing the spread of disease between birds. Recently, scientists noted that the spread of Trichomonad protozoan parasites, which cause a disease termed Trichomoniasis, was on the rise especially among mourning dove and band-tailed pigeon populations in the West.

You can tell if you have a disease problem at your feeders because diseased birds are less alert and less active, they feed less and may cower on a feeder, they may be reluctant to fly, and their feathers do not appear to be in good shape. Birds afflicted with Trichomoniasis typically develop sores in their mouths and throats. Unable to swallow, they drop food or water contaminated with Trichomonads that other birds then consume, thus spreading the disease.

With the concern over this and other diseases, including Salmonellosis, Aspergillosis, and Avian Pox, which are easily transmitted at birdfeeders and birdbaths, pay diligent attention to cleanliness in pursuit of responsible and rewarding bird feeding practices. Birds with disease are more likely to die from starvation, dehydration, predation, and severe weather, so protect them by following these tips.

- \* **Disinfect your feeder and birdbath:** To keep pathogens at bay, immerse your seed feeder or birdbath in a nine to one water-bleach solution, rinsing it thoroughly, one to two times per month (for tips on cleaning hummingbird feeders, [click here](#)). In the presence of outbreaks, disinfect twice as often.
- \* **Empty water from your birdbath every day:** Brush or wipe it clean, rinse, then refill with fresh water.
- \* **Discard old seed and hulls:** When you clean your feeder, get rid of the old seed. Rake or sweep up any uneaten hulls on the ground. The disease-causing Trichomonad protozoan, for example, can live for up to five days in food and several hours in water.
- \* **Avoid overcrowding:** If possible, provide more than one feeder and spread them out. Crowding only expedites the spread of disease, so give the birds variety and plenty of room.