



Feeder cages allow the appropriate birds to feast and can prevent unwanted dinner guests such as squirrels, deer, and raccoons.

BIRD FEEDER BASICS

Color winter views outside your windows and help sustain birds with feeders but consider some do's and don'ts.

Jacelyn Downey

Bird watching is a popular activity with 47 million people (20 percent of the U.S. population) identifying themselves as bird watchers.

Unlike other types of watchable wildlife, birds can be seen year-round in every habitat in rural and urban settings – often right next to one's home.

While most wild birds rely on wild foods for a majority of meals, more than 100 North American species supplement their diet with bird seed, suet, fruit, and nectar from feeders. Stack the deck in your favor to see these birds by simply offering them a nutritious snack.

Birds will visit feeders during the

spring and fall migrations, and nesting birds utilize feeders during the summer. Feeders are most beneficial during the winter when natural food supplies are scarce.

Perhaps the best place to start is to decide which critters you *don't* want to attract. If in an area where there are bears, plan to put bird feeders out only from November through April unless feeders can be hung 10 feet high and 4 feet from structures. Raccoons, squirrels, and deer will also be attracted to feeders, especially if seeds and other food types are constantly falling to the ground. To avoid this, only offer seed-type favorites of the birds you are trying to attract, and avoid seed mixes.

What do I Feed the Birds?

There are three types of food that will attract the majority of our bird species. Most popular is **black oil sunflower seed**. Many birds will throw out all the others in mixed feed just to get to this seed. Save the mess, unnecessary cost, and unwanted feeder bandits by simply buying this seed alone. This type is usually put in a hopper feeder.

Hopper feeders are great because they hold a large amount of seed, most birds will feed from them, and they are easy to fill. The downside is that if moisture seeps in, the seeds can get moldy, which can kill the birds. These feeders are extremely vulnerable to unwanted visitors

A FAMILY THAT FLOCKS TOGETHER

Feeding birds is a great family project. Children are naturally drawn to the excitement of seeing the birds and learning about them by watching them. Get started by involving the whole family to build your own feeder using recycled materials. Consider reading “The Night Tree” by Eve Bunting this winter. It tells a story of a family that selects a tree in the woods each Christmas to decorate with edible food for birds.

Another great way to include the family is by participating in a citizen science project such as Project FeederWatch (<http://feederwatch.org/>) or the Great Backyard Bird Count (<http://gbbc.birdcount.org/>).

such as squirrels. Putting a cone-like baffle underneath the feeder and keeping them away from trees – since squirrels can jump down onto them – will increase protection.

The next most popular food is **nyjer or thistle seed**. This tiny black seed is favored by goldfinches, pine siskin, and redpolls, which are all common winter birds in Wyoming. This seed is fantastic because it can be fed in a specially designed tube feeder or “sock” with small seed holes that prevent the little seeds from falling on the ground. Unwanted larger mob birds like blackbirds and starlings are discouraged from getting the seed. This is key because thistle seed is one of the more expensive seed types. Further discourage mob bird assaults by encasing these feeders with “cages” made from chicken wire.

Finally, **suet and mashed nut-butters** are great for chickadees, nuthatches, and woodpeckers. Suet is simply animal fat – usually from beef, but hunters can use wild game fat as well. Suet is fed in small square cages designed especially for suet cakes, vegetable sacks, or in mesh bags used to package onions, oranges, and other fruit. Hang the cage or sack because unlike larger, unwanted birds that need a platform to access food, gravity defying chickadees, nuthatches, and woodpeckers can easily hang from the mesh or wire. Another way to discourage moochers is to hang the feeder from a board so the arms of squirrels and raccoons can’t reach it.

Some Birds are Picky Eaters

Some birds call for specialized food types.

Hummingbirds require nectar that can be supplemented by making a sugar solution of one part white sugar to four parts water. Boil or microwave the solution briefly to sterilize and dissolve sugar crystals, but do not add red food coloring since the red on the feeder is enough to attract birds.

The best way to provide hummingbird food, however, is by planting nectar-rich flowers such as penstemon and other native plants. “Plants with Altitude,” a guide for Wyoming gardeners, is available to help select plants or go to <http://bit.ly/wyomingwildscapes> for ideas.

To see cedar waxwings and orioles, put out orange halves or dried fruit. For robins and bluebirds, try mealworms. These types of food can be fed on a platform feeder. Ground feeders, such as turkeys, will eat cracked corn thrown on the ground.



Squirrels, like this one raiding a hopper feeder, are a notorious nuisance for birds and the people trying to feed them. Keeping feeders away from trees and other jumping off points can help as well as “baffles” or cones placed on top of and beneath feeders.

Both platform and ground feeding are also the easiest ways to feed pesky wildlife such as deer, raccoons, squirrels, and bears, so carefully monitor the visitors to be sure you aren’t “feeding” a problem.

The Risks of Feeding

Bird feeders also present risks to birds, potentially increasing the chances of window collisions, predation, and exposure to disease. According to a recent study, cats kill an estimated 1.4 to 3.7 billion birds each year. Avoid feeding birds if your cats aren’t kept indoors. Placing feeders a few feet from windows or adding window clings or light catchers will help prevent collisions. Storing feed in metal containers will decrease the chances of mouse, insect, and mold infestations.

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