



Birds can be attracted to your home simply by offering food, water and shelter. Trees and shrubs that yield fruit, berries, seeds, nuts and cones will provide food. Tangles of wild plants and dense undergrowth left to thrive in chosen areas of your property will provide shelter, protection and natural nesting and roosting sites. Nesting boxes can be secured to trees and posts to attract several species of birds. Birdbaths or pools can be built to supply water and feeders strategically placed around the yard will furnish supplementary food for the birds when natural sources diminish.

## Backyard Bird Feeding

### Getting Started

When you want to attract a particular bird species and keep it coming back to your backyard, what you do will be determined by where you live, and the time of year. For example, on any winter day, you are likely to see a cardinal at a sunflower feeder in Virginia, a goldfinch at a thistle feeder in Massachusetts and hummingbirds at a nectar feeder in southern California. A bird field identification book has pictures of different birds and will help you find the names for the birds you're likely to see and the time of year you're most likely to see them. So, first determine what birds are likely to occur in your area. You can find a great resource here: [National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America](#) or here: [Birds of the World](#) , if you live outside of North America.

### Feeder Selection

When the ground is covered with snow and ice, it's hard to resist just tossing seed out the door. But it's healthier for the birds to get their handouts at a feeding station, rather than off the ground. Regardless of the season, food that sits on the ground for even a short time is exposed to contamination by dampness, mold, bacteria, animal droppings, lawn fertilizers and pesticides. You can start simply with a piece of scrap wood elevated a few inches above the ground. Add a few holes for, drainage and you've built a platform feeder. It won't be long before the birds find it.

### Placement

There are several factors to consider after you've decided to feed birds in your backyard. Where do you want to watch your birds? From a kitchen window ... a sliding glass door opening onto a deck ... a second-story window? Pick a location that is easy to get to. When the weather is bad and birds are most vulnerable, you may be reluctant to fill a feeder that is not in a convenient spot near a door or an accessible window. Also, pick a site where discarded seed shells and bird

droppings won't be a cleanup problem. Put your feeder where the squirrels can't reach. Squirrels become a problem when they take over a bird feeder, scaring the birds away and tossing seed all over. Squirrels have been known to chew right through plastic and wooden feeders. If you've seen squirrels in your neighborhood, it is safe to assume they will visit your feeder. Think long and hard before you hang anything from a tree limb. Squirrels are incredibly agile, and any feeder hanging from a tree is likely to become a squirrel feeder. In the long run, a squirrel-proof feeder or any feeder on a pole with a baffle is the least aggravating solution. The most effective squirrel-proof feeder is the pole-mounted metal "house" type. If you must hang a feeder, select a tube protected with metal mesh. Most plastic "squirrel-proof" feeders, despite manufacturers' claims, may eventually succumb to the squirrels. Any wood or plastic feeder can be effective when mounted on a pole with a plastic or metal baffle, if the pole is at least 10 feet or more from a tree limb or trunk (squirrels can jump great distances).

### **Durability**

Bird feeders are made from a variety of materials. You can buy disposable plastic bag feeders; feeders made of cloth, nylon, vinyl and metal netting; clear, colored and PVC plastic tubes; ceramic and terra cotta; redwood, western cedar, birch, pine and plywood; sheet metal and aluminized steel; glass tubes and bottles.

How long a feeder lasts depends on how well you maintain it, the effects of weather, and whether squirrels can get to it. Water can get into any feeder regardless of how carefully you protect it. Cloth, vinyl, nylon and metal netting feeders are inexpensive, but they do not protect your seed from spoiling in damp or wet weather. Improve them by adding a plastic dome. Most wood, plastic, ceramic and solid metal feeders keep seed dry, but water can get into the feeding portals. Look for feeders with drainage holes in the bottoms of both the feeder hopper and the seed tray. Even bowl-type feeders and trays with drainage holes will clog with seed and bird droppings that can mix with rainwater and be

unhealthy for any animal. Look for shallow plate-like seed trays to catch dropped seeds while allowing spent seed shells to blow away.

When you feed birds, expect bird droppings and a leftover food mess. While you do not have to wash the feeder daily, you should clean it at least every few weeks. Diseases like salmonella can grow in moldy, wet seed and bird droppings in your feeder tray and on the ground below. Move your feeder a few feet each season to give the ground underneath time to assimilate the seed debris and bird droppings. The maintenance required to keep your feeder clean varies according to the type of feeder. A thistle feeder for goldfinches should be cleaned about once a month depending on how often it rains. Feeding hummingbirds requires cleaning at the very least weekly, but preferably two or three times a week. Sunflower and suet feeders need to be cleaned only once a month. Plastic, ceramic and glass feeders are easy to clean. Wash them in a bucket of hot, soapy water fortified with a capful or two of chlorine bleach. Use the same regimen with wood feeders, but substitute another disinfectant for the bleach so your wood won't fade.

### **Food Capacity**

The ideal feeder capacity varies with your situation, and the types of birds you want to attract. If you feed hummingbirds, big feeders are not always better. One hummingbird will drink about twice its body weight (less than an ounce) a day. Early in the season, hummers are territorial and won't share a feeder. A sixteen ounce feeder can be wasteful, or even lethal, because artificial nectar (sugar water) can ferment in the hot summer sun. A two ounce feeder is more than enough for one hummer. Increase the size of your feeder depending on your location and how many hummers you see in your yard. If you opt for a large volume seed feeder, protect it from the weather and keep it clean. If after months of use, the birds suddenly abandon your feeder full of seed, it's time for a cleaning.

## **How Many Birds**

If too many birds at your feeder can become a problem. You can control their numbers by putting out smaller amounts of seed, or by using specialty seeds or restrictive feeders that will attract only certain species. If you fill your feeder only when it's empty, the birds will look for food elsewhere. You can encourage small birds and discourage large birds with feeders that restrict access. Wood feeders with vertical bars and feeders covered with wire mesh frustrate larger birds. The most non-selective feeders are the tray, platform or house feeders because they allow easy access by all birds. Tube feeders without trays also restrict access to only small birds. Remove the perches, and you've further restricted the feeder to only those birds that can easily cling - finches, chickadees, titmice and woodpeckers.

If starlings are a problem at your suet feeder, discourage them by using a suet feeder with access only from the bottom. Starlings are reluctant to perch upside down. Chickadees and woodpeckers don't find that a problem. You can virtually eliminate visits by birds you would rather not see by offering seeds they won't eat. If you use more than one type of seed, put them in separate feeders. This will reduce wasted seeds, as birds will toss unwanted seeds out of a feeder to get to their favorites. Watch a feeder filled with a seed mix and you'll see the birds methodically drop or kick out most of the seeds to get to their favorite, sunflower seed.

Many birds prefer sunflower. Some prefer millet. A few prefer peanuts. Sparrows, blackbirds, doves and juncos will eat the other grains used in pre-made mixes: corn, milo, red millet, oats, wheat and canary seed. Birds will also kick out artificial "berry" pellets, processed seed flavored and colored to look like real fruit. Black oil sunflower is the hands-down favorite of all the birds that visit tube and house feeders. Birds who visit platform feeders (doves and sparrows) favor white proso millet. Ducks, geese and quail will eat corn. Many cereal grains (corn, milo, oats, canary, wheat, rape, flax and buckwheat) in mixed bird seeds are NOT

favorites of birds that visit tube feeders. The most effective way to attract the largest variety of birds to your yard is to put out separate feeders for each food:

- a starling-resistant suet feeder
- a house feeder for sunflower seed
- a bluebird feeder
- a wire mesh cage feeder for peanuts
- a nectar feeder
- a tube feeder for thistle
- a stationary or tray fruit feeder
- a house or platform feeder for millet

### **Birds Attracted by Various Feeders and Foods**

#### *Tube Feeder with Black Oil Sunflower Seed-*

Goldfinches, chickadees, woodpeckers, nuthatches, titmice, redpolls, pine siskins

#### *Adding a Tray to the Tube Feeder Will Also Attract-*

cardinals, jays, crossbills, purple finches, house finches, white-throated sparrows, white-crowned sparrows

#### *Tray or Platform Feeder -- with Millet-*

Doves, house sparrows, blackbirds, juncos, cowbirds, towhees, white-throated sparrows, tree sparrows, white-crowned sparrows, chipping sparrows

#### *Tray or Platform Feeder -- with Corn-*

Starlings, house sparrows, grackles, jays, juncos, bobwhite, quail, doves, ring-necked Pheasants, white-throated sparrows

*Fruit-*

Orioles, tanagers, mockingbirds, bluebirds, thrashers, cardinals, woodpeckers, jays, starlings, thrushes, cedar waxwings, yellow-breasted chats

*Hanging Suet Feeder-*

Woodpeckers, wrens, chickadees, nuthatches, kinglets, thrashers, creepers, cardinals, starlings

*Peanut Butter Suet-*

Woodpeckers, goldfinches, juncos, cardinals, thrushes, jays, kinglets, bluebirds, wrens, starlings

*Hanging Peanut Feeder-*

Woodpeckers, chickadees, titmice

*Platform Feeder or Tube Feeder and Tray - with Peanuts-*

Cardinals, grackles, titmice, starlings, jays

*Nyjer Thistle Feeder with Tray-*

Goldfinches, house finches, purple finches, redpolls, pine siskins, doves, chickadees, song sparrows, dark-eyed juncos, white-throated sparrows

*Nectar Feeder-*

Hummingbirds, orioles, cardinals, tanagers, woodpeckers, finches, thrushes

## **Uninvited Guests at the Birdfeeder**

Once you get your bird feeding station up and running, you may run into problems with two kinds of uninvited guests - those interested in the seeds (squirrels and chipmunks, rats and mice, and starlings and house sparrows), and those interested in eating a bird for dinner (cats and hawks).

When a squirrel is at the feeder, you're not likely to see birds. Squirrels will scare off the birds while they eat the seed and sometimes they will eat the feeder too. The simplest solution is a squirrel-proof feeder or pole. Starlings and house sparrows are not native to North America and are aggressive towards other species. Choose your feeder and seed to exclude these species if possible. Chipmunks, rats and mice can also become a problem where there is seed spillage under the feeder. Don't use mixed bird seed, and if you don't have a squirrel problem, add a feeder tray.

Feral cats and your neighbor's tabby are a serious threat to many birds. Keep feeders away from brush piles and shrubbery, as this offers cats the necessary cover to surprise birds. If there are no cats in your neighborhood and you find a pile of feathers near your feeder, look for a full-bellied hawk perching on a tree nearby. Don't put out poisons or try to trap hawks though, as this is against state and federal law.

## **Questions about Feeding Wild Birds**

*When is the best time to start?*

Usually, whenever the weather is severe, birds will appreciate a reliable supplemental food source. In northern areas, start before the onset of cold weather so birds have time to find the feeder.

*When's the best time to stop?*

Although you can feed birds year round, especially with fruit and nectar, you can stop feeding seeds once a reliable supply of insects is available in the spring.



*Is it best to stop feeding hummingbirds after Labor Day?*

There is no evidence that feeding hummingbirds after Labor Day will keep them from migrating. In fact, it may help a weakened straggler refuel for the long haul. Leave your nectar feeders out until the birds stop coming.

*How long does it take for birds to find a feeder?*

It may take more time for birds to find window feeders than hanging or pole-mounted feeders. You may want to wrap aluminum foil around the top of the feeder hanger. Sometimes all it takes is the reflection of light on the foil to catch their attention.

*My feeder is full of seeds. I haven't seen a bird in months. Am I doing something wrong?*

When birds desert your feeder, it may be simply that a lot of natural food is available nearby. Or something may be wrong, such as spoiled seeds or a contaminated feeder. Throw the seeds away and wash the feeder. Look at where your feeder is placed. Be sure it's not vulnerable to predators. At the same time, make sure it is not in an open area, away from the cover in which birds usually travel.

*Will birds' feet stick to metal feeders and perches in the wet winter weather?*

Birds don't have sweat glands in their feet, so they won't freeze onto metal feeders. There's no need to cover any metal feeder parts with plastic or wood to protect birds' feet, tongues or eyes.

*Do wild birds need grit?*

Birds have no teeth to grind their food. The dirt, sand, pebbles and grit they eat sit in their crop and help grind up their food. Adding grit to your feeder is helpful, particularly in the winter and spring. Crushed eggshells do the same thing, and in the spring have an added benefit: they provide birds with extra calcium for producing eggs of their own.

### *Can birds choke on peanut butter?*

There is no evidence that birds can choke on peanut butter. However, birds have no salivary glands. You can make it easier on them by mixing peanut butter with lard, cornmeal or grit. Your birds will appreciate drinking water too, from a bird bath or trough.

### *Won't suet go bad in the summer?*

In the winter, raw beef fat from the local butcher is all you need for your suet feeder. When temperatures rise, raw fat can melt and get rancid. It's safer to use commercially rendered suet cakes in the spring and summer months or make your own from one of my recipes. Rendering (boiling) the fat kills bacteria.

### *What is hummingbird nectar? Do hummers need nectar fortified with vitamins and minerals?*

You can make your own hummingbird nectar by adding 1/4 cup of sugar to a cup of boiling water. Remember, sugar water will ferment when left in the hot sun, turning nectar deadly. Do not put out a nectar feeder if you are not willing to clean it at least weekly, preferably twice a week. Hummers eat insects for their protein. There is no evidence that these tiny birds need vitamin and mineral supplements. There is also no evidence that adding red food coloring to nectar will harm the birds, but it probably is not necessary to attract them. Just put your feeder near red flowers or buy a red hummingbird feeder

### *How can I avoid bees at my hummingbird feeder?*

Bees will inevitably visit your hummingbird feeder, especially in hot weather. Little plastic bee guards may help keep them from getting nectar but it won't stop them from trying. Don't take the chance of contaminating your nectar by putting vegetable oil around the feeding portals. One solution is to add a few small feeders away from where people are likely to be bothered by bees.

*How close to my window can I put a feeder?*

Birds will come right to your window. Sometimes it takes a while for them to overcome their initial reluctance, so be patient. Don't worry that a feeder on the window will cause birds to fly into the window. Birds fly into the window because they see the reflection of the woods. Window feeders and decals help break up the reflection.

*Is cracked corn coated with a red dye safe to use?*

No. The red or pink coating is capstan, a fungicide used on seeds meant for planting. If you buy a bag of cracked corn or other seed treated with capstan, return it to the store. It can kill horses, other mammals and wild birds.

*I bought a bag of sunflower seeds early in the spring. Over the summer first noticed worms, then moths. What can I do to keep the bugs out?*

Moths lay their eggs in sunflower seeds. The eggs lay dormant as long as the seeds are stored in a cool dry place. In the summer, seeds get hot and the eggs hatch. The best way to avoid this problem is to buy seeds in smaller quantities, or store your seeds in a cool, dry place. It also helps to know where your retailer stores the seed. An air-conditioned storage unit is the better choice. Insects also lay their eggs in burlap bags. Don't buy seeds in burlap bags. Don't buy seed in paper and plastic bags with patched holes. That may be a sign of insect or rodent infestation.

### **Landscaping for Birds**

The most surefire way to attract birds to your backyard is to make certain the appropriate habitat is available to them. You may be lucky and already have a good supply of food, shelter, and water available for our feathered friends. In that case, you have to do little more than stand back and watch. However, for most backyards, bird habitat must be created. It's called "landscaping for birds" and it can be as simple or extravagant as you wish. Whatever the approach,

anyone who has ever tried this type of landscaping comes away with a real love for it after their first sparkling hummingbirds hover at the coral bells, or the perky catbird comes down for a drink of water from the birdbath, or the sleek waxwings gather en masse to sample bittersweet berries.

## **Benefits of Landscaping for Birds**

You can derive many benefits from landscaping to attract birds to your yard:

### *Increased Wildlife Populations*

You can probably double the number of bird species using your property with a good landscaping plan.

### *Energy Conservation*

By carefully arranging your conifer and hardwood trees, you can lower winter heating and summer cooling bills for your house.

### *Soil Conservation*

Certain landscape plants can prevent soil erosion.

### *Natural Beauty*

A good landscaping plan contributes to a beautiful, natural setting around your home that is pleasing to people as well as birds.

### *Wildlife Photography*

Wildlife photography is a wonderful hobby for people of all ages.

### *Bird watching*

Try keeping a list of all the birds you see in your yard or from your yard. Some people have counted nearly 20 species of birds in their yard!

### *Natural Insect Control*

Birds such as tree swallows, house wrens, brown thrashers and orioles eat a variety of insects.

### *Food Production*

Some plants that attract wildlife are also appealing to humans. People and wildlife can share cherries, chokecherries, strawberries, and crabapples.

### *Property Value*

A good landscaping plan can greatly increase the value of your property by adding natural beauty and an abundance of wildlife.

### *Habitat for Kids*

Some of the best wildlife habitats are the best habitats for young people to discover the wonders of nature. A backyard bird habitat can stimulate young people to develop a lifelong interest in wildlife and conservation.

## **Basics of Landscaping for Birds**

Landscaping for birds involves nine basic principles:

### *Food*

Every bird species has its own unique food requirements that may change as the seasons change. Learn the food habits of the birds you wish to attract. Then plant the appropriate trees, shrubs, and flowers to provide the fruits, berries, seeds, acorns, and nectar.

### *Water*

You may be able to double the number of bird species in your yard by providing a source of water. A frog pond, water garden, or bird bath will get lots of bird use, especially if the water is dripping, splashing or moving.

### *Shelter*

Birds need places where they can hide from predators and escape from severe weather. Trees (including dead ones), shrubs, tall grass and bird houses provide excellent shelter.

### *Diversity*

The best landscaping plan is one that includes a variety of native plants. This helps attract the most bird species.

### *Four Seasons*

Give birds food and shelter throughout the year by planting a variety of trees, shrubs and flowers that provide year-round benefits.

### *Arrangement*

Properly arrange the different habitat components in your yard. Consider the effects of prevailing winds (and snow drifting) so your yard will be protected from harsh winter weather.

### *Protection*

Birds should be protected from unnecessary mortality. When choosing the placement of bird feeders and nest boxes, consider their accessibility to predators. Picture windows can also be dangerous for birds that fly directly at windows when they see the reflection of trees and shrubs. A network of parallel, vertical strings spaced 4 inches apart can be placed on the outside of windows to prevent this problem. Be cautious about the kinds of herbicides and pesticides used in your yard. Apply them only when necessary and strictly according to label instructions. In fact, try gardening and lawn care without using pesticides. Details can be found here:

[The Organic Gardener's Handbook of Natural Insect and Disease Control](#)

### *Hardiness Zones*

When considering plants not native to your area, consult a plant hardiness zone map, found in most garden catalogues. Make sure the plants you want are rated for the winter hardiness zone classification of your area.

### *Soils and Topography*

Consult your local garden center, university or county extension office to have your soil tested. Plant species are often adapted to certain types of soils. If you know what type of soil you have, you can identify the types of plants that will grow best in your yard.

### **Plants for Wild Birds**

Seven types of plants are important as bird habitat:

#### *Conifers*

Conifers are evergreen trees and shrubs that include pines, spruces, firs, arborvitae, junipers, cedars, and yews. These plants are important as escape cover, winter shelter and summer nesting sites. Some also provide sap, fruits and seeds.

#### *Grasses and Legumes*

Grasses and legumes can provide cover for ground nesting birds-but only if the area is not mowed during the nesting season. Some grasses and legumes provide seeds as well. Native prairie grasses are becoming increasingly popular for landscaping purposes.

#### *Nectar--producing Plants*

Nectar-producing plants are very popular for attracting hummingbirds and orioles. Flowers with tubular red corollas are especially attractive to hummingbirds. Other trees, shrubs, vines and flowers also can provide nectar for hummingbirds.

### *Summer-fruiting Plants*

This category includes plants that produce fruits or berries from May through August. In the summer these plants can attract brown thrashers, catbirds, robins, thrushes, waxwings, woodpeckers, orioles, cardinals, towhees and grosbeaks. Examples of summer-fruiting plants are various species of cherry, chokecherry, honeysuckle, raspberry, serviceberry, blackberry, blueberry, grape, mulberry, plum and elderberry

### *Fall-fruiting Plants*

This landscape component includes shrubs and vines whose fruits ripen in the fall. These foods are important both for migratory birds which build up fat reserves before migration and as a food source for non-migratory species that need to enter the winter season in good physical condition. Fall-fruiting plants include dogwoods, mountain ash, winter-berries, cotoneasters and buffalo-berries.

### *Winter-fruiting Plants*

Winter-fruiting plants are those whose fruits remain attached to the plants long after they first become ripe in the fall. Many are not palatable until they have frozen and thawed many times. Examples are glossy black chokecherry, Siberian and "red splendor" crabapple, snowberry, bittersweet, sumacs, American high bush cranberry, eastern and European wahoo, Virginia creeper, and Chinaberry

### *Nut and Acorn Plants*

These include oaks, hickories, buckeyes, chestnuts, butternuts, walnuts and hazels. A variety of birds, such as jays, woodpeckers and titmice, eat the meats of broken nuts and acorns. These plants also contribute to good nesting habitat.



## **How to Get Started**

Think of this project as landscaping for birds. Your goal will be to plant an assortment of trees, shrubs and flowers that will attract birds. If you plan carefully it can be inexpensive and fun for the whole family. The best way to get started is to follow these guidelines:

### *Set Your Priorities*

Decide what types of birds you wish to attract, and then build your plan around the needs of those species. Talk to friends and neighbors to find out what kinds of birds frequent your area. Attend a local bird club meeting and talk to local birdwatchers about how they have attracted birds to their yards.

### *Use Native Plants When Possible*

Check with the botany department of a nearby college or university or with your state's natural heritage program for lists of trees, shrubs, and wildflowers native to your area. Use this list as a starting point for your landscape plan. These plants are naturally adapted to the climate of your area and are a good long-term investment. Many native plants are both beautiful for landscaping purposes and excellent for birds. If you include normative plant species in your plan, be sure they are not considered "invasive pests" by plant experts. Check out these resources: [Sunset Western Garden Book](#) or [Sunset Western Landscaping Book](#)

### *Draw a Map of Your Property*

Draw a map of your property to scale using graph paper. Identify buildings, sidewalks, power lines, buried cables, fences, septic tank fields, trees, shrubs and patios. Consider how your plan relates to your neighbor's property-will the tree you plant shade out the neighbor's vegetable garden? Identify and map sunny or shady sites, low or wet sites, sandy sites, and native plants that will be left in place.

### *Get Your Soil Tested*

Get your soil tested by your local garden center, county extension agent or soil conservation service. Find out what kinds of soil you have and then find out if your soils have nutrient or organic deficiencies that fertilization or addition of compost can correct. The soils you have will help determine the plants which can be included in your landscaping plan.

### *Review the Seven Plant Habitat Components*

Review the seven plant components described previously. Which components are already present? Which ones are missing? Remember that you are trying to provide food and cover through all four seasons. Develop a list of plants that you think will provide the missing habitat components.

### *Talk to Resource Experts*

Review this plant list with landscaping resource experts who can match your ideas with your soil types, soil drainage and the plants available through state or private nurseries. People at the nearby arboretum can help with your selections. At an arboretum you can also see what many plants look like. Talk with local bird clubs, the members of which probably are knowledgeable about landscaping for birds.

### *Develop Your Planting Plan*

Sketch on your map the plants you wish to add. Draw trees to a scale that represents three fourths of their mature width, and shrubs at their full mature width. This will help you calculate how many trees and shrubs you need. There is a tendency to include so many trees that eventually your yard will be mostly shaded. Be sure to leave open sunny sites where flowers and shrubs can thrive. Decide how much money you can spend and the time span of your project. Don't try to do too much at once. You might try a five-year development plan.

### *Implement Your Plan*

Finally, go to it! Begin your plantings and include your entire family so they can all feel they are helping wildlife. Document your plantings on paper and by photographs. Try taking pictures of your yard from the same spots every year to document the growth of your plants.

### *Maintain Your Plan*

Keep your new trees, shrubs and flowers adequately watered, and keep your planting areas weed-free by use of landscaping film and wood chips or shredded bark mulch. This avoids the use of herbicides for weed control. If problems develop with your plants, consult a local nursery, garden center or county extension agent.

### *And Finally...*

Make sure to take the time to enjoy the wildlife that will eventually respond to your landscaping efforts.

All that is remaining to keep your birds at home and coming back year after year is a well-built birdhouse. What's the best way to get a well-built birdhouse?

**BUILD IT YOURSELF!**

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Larry Jordan". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.