

Supplemental Feeding Wild Birds

Feeding the birds that visit your home is one of the most rewarding ways to attract and observe wildlife. Starting a feeding hobby will take a little time, an investment in a feeder or two and food to go in them. The trick to feeding is choosing the right combination of foods and feeders to attract the birds you want to see. The next few pages will go over common feeder foods for birds and what they attract.

What and How to Feed Wild Birds

Bird species have certain tastes when it comes to the food they eat and how it is presented to them. By tailoring the foods you offer to your favorite birds, you increase your chances of attracting them. Seeds for birds are readily available to wild bird lovers. The best seeds to buy are those that most birds eat. Choices of food for bird seed falls into seven main categories:



American Goldfinch by: Elizabeth Peck

Black Oil Sunflower is rich in fats and proteins needed by a variety of birds

Common Seed Mixes attract a variety of non-native birds including European Starlings, House Sparrows and pigeons. Many of these mixes also contain a substantial amount of red milo which only a few species of bird in the southwest eat.

Hulled Sunflower is chopped up pieces of sunflower seeds without the coats.

Nyjer (formerly known as thistle) is an imported seed that comes from African daisies, not thistles.

Safflower is generally found in higher end bird seed mixes.

Striped Sunflower seeds are a favorite of many birds and people.

White Proso Millet can be found in mixes or can be fed separately.

Types of Feeders

Bird feeders come in lots of shapes and sizes and are fashioned to supply foods that attract particular groups of birds. Below is a list of common feeder types.

Hopper Feeders are designed to look like houses. They typically have 4 walls and a roof to keep seeds clean and dry. Hopper feeders can come in elaborate designs and can have squirrel-proofing features. Hopper feeders are generally designed to hold larger seeds and feed larger birds.

Platform Feeders can be easily made from treated plywood with raised edges and will draw in those birds that feed on the ground some or all of the time. Cardinals, blue jays, juncos, sparrows and mourning doves will flock to a mixture of millet, sunflower, cracked corn, and peanut kernels in this type of feeder. Platform feeders can also be used to offer mealworms and fruit to birds. Platform feeders are best used when mounted on poles that have predator baffles on them.

Tube Feeders are especially attractive to smaller birds and are comprised of a plastic or glass tube filled with seeds. Tube bird feeders are designed to keep seed clean and dry. Tube feeders with metal feeding ports are better for areas with more squirrel traffic. Some types of tube feeders are specially designed to hold small seeds like Nyjer seeds.

Favorite Seeds of Backyard Birds

Species	BO	CO	SU	NY	SA	SS	MI
American Goldfinch	X		X	X	X		
Black-capped Chickadee	X		X		X	X	
Blue Jay	X				X	X	
Chipping Sparrow			X				X
Common Grackle	X						
Common Redpoll			X	X			
Dark-eyed Junco			X	X			
Downy Woodpecker	X		X			X	
Eastern Bluebird							
Eastern Towhee	X						X
European Starling		X					
Hairy Woodpecker	X		X			X	
House Finch	X	X	X	X	X		
House Sparrow		X	X				
Indigo Bunting				X			X
Mourning Dove	X		X	X	X	X	X
Northern Cardinal	X				X	X	X
Pine Siskin	X		X	X			
Purple Finch	X		X	X	X		
Rose-breasted Grosbeak	X		X		X	X	
Tufted Titmouse	X		X		X	X	
White-breasted Nuthatch	X		X		X	X	



Blue Jay by: David Kazyak

Other Types of Food



Baltimore Oriole by: David Brezinski

Fruit

Oranges, apples, grapes, and fruit cocktails can attract a variety of bird species to your backyard, including seed eating birds like tanagers. Only fresh fruit should be offered to birds as many dried fruits have added sugars that are harmful to birds. Fresh fruit can be placed on railings, nailed to trees or hung from branches. Be sure to clean fruit feeders every few days and remove any moldy fruit that may be left. Orange slices are an excellent attractant for Baltimore Orioles in the spring, but be careful of ants and wasps which might also enjoy fruit offerings.

Suet

Commercial suet cakes or fresh suet mixed with sunflower and other seed will make a favored treat for cardinals, woodpeckers, nuthatches and chickadees. Most commercially available varieties don't melt in the sun, and the best times to feed suet are in the fall and winter months. Suet is the fat that surrounds the kidneys of beef cattle. Many food stores will carry it, if requested. One word of caution concerning raw suet: it can go rancid in the sun, so only offer it on cold winter days. If you live in an area with black bears, then it is best to only offer suet when the black bears are hibernating.

Mealworms

Mealworms might not be so appetizing to us, but to many species of birds, mealworms are a very tasty meal. Mealworms provide an excellent source of protein, calcium and vitamins. Bluebirds, in particular, can really benefit from mealworm supplements in the winter and during early spring. Mealworms can be offered in special feeders or on platforms.

Nectar

Nectar, a sugar solution, is a favorite food of hummingbirds. Attracting these tiny, colorful birds is a highlight in any bird lover's experience. Nectar can be bought in packages, or it can be made at home. To make hummingbird nectar, take one part sugar and add it to four parts water. Bring the solution to a boil to kill any potential fungi or bacteria. Be sure to change your nectar solution and thoroughly clean your nectar feeders every two to three days. The fungus and bacteria that accumulate in nectar feeders can kill hummingbirds.

In Maryland, there is only one native species of hummingbird, the Ruby-Throated Hummingbird. This bird is found in Maryland only during the warmer months. Occasionally, species like the Rufous hummingbird will migrate through our state.



Ruby-throated hummingbird by: Jeff Tome

Other Types of Food

Bird Feeding Tips

- Feeding is most productive from Oct-April when the least amount of natural food is available
- To attract a variety of birds, use a variety of foods
- Plant native trees, shrubs and flowers for additional food and cover
- Keep all your feeders clean
- Eliminate insecticide use in your yard
- Keep cats indoors to prevent feeder fatalities
- To prevent raptors from eating your feeder birds, be sure to place feeders near shrubs or cover except if the feeders are on or near the ground
- To prevent squirrels, put feeders on poles away from your house or from trees, with guards on the poles to prevent the squirrels from accessing the seed. If squirrels become a real problem for you, then stop feeding the birds for awhile.
- To reduce fighting among birds at your feeders, add more feeders.
- Avoid feeding bread or other table scraps to birds or other wildlife. These foods can spoil quickly and grow bacteria and mold which can harm or even kill songbirds. Bread is also similar to “junk food” for birds and does not provide the proper nutrition. Salted and/or sugared foods can be dangerous for small birds.
- Ground hard-boiled egg shells can provide calcium and grit essential for birds. Make sure eggs are cooked before providing shells or bake shells for 20 minutes at 250 degrees to sterilize them



White-breasted Nuthatch by: George Jett

Want to Learn More? Then, Check Out These Helpful Websites:

- Audubon Bird-Friendly Communities
 - <https://www.audubon.org/conservation/bird-friendly-communities>
- Cornell Lab of Ornithology
 - <http://www.birds.cornell.edu>
- Maryland's Wild Acres
 - <https://dnr.maryland.gov/wildlife/Pages/habitat/wildacres.aspx>
- Native Plants for Wildlife Habitat and Conservation Landscaping
 - <https://www.fws.gov/chesapeakebay/pdf/NativePlantsforWildlifeHabitatandConservationLandscaping.pdf>