

# Winter Bird Feeding

One of the chief pleasures of winter in a colder climate is to be inside a warm house and look out at the wild birds at the feeder. You can feel generous and virtuous in comfort. And you get terrific entertainment all winter long.

## What do birds want?

In short, offer seeds and water. Many of the birds we see in winter are seed eaters. They have to be: insects are hard to come by in areas that experience harsh winters. However, the trees, grasses, and wild flowers have just finished their yearly production of seeds, and this is the main kind of food our wintering birds live on.



By setting up a bird feeding station, you're taking your cue from nature, offering the kind of nourishment that the birds are adapted to. You provide a generous, reliable, source of food, and the birds gladly come and help themselves, up close, where it's convenient for you to watch them.



## Which foods to provide?

The hands-down favorite bird seed is sunflower. It attracts cardinals, woodpeckers, blue jays, goldfinches, purple finches, chickadees, titmice, and nuthatches. I offer black sunflower seeds in the hanging coconut feeders.

Get the **black sunflower seeds**, sometimes called oil seeds. Birds prefer them to the grey-and-white-striped sunflower seeds sold off the candy rack for people, because they're higher in oil content. They are softer shelled, hence easier to crack open. They're also cheaper than the grey-and-white ones.

Another essential bird seed is **niger**. Goldfinches adore niger. You may have dozens of goldfinches visiting your niger feeder at once, which is quite a cheering sight on a winter day. Niger is a black seed, so tiny and light you can blow away a handful with a gentle breath.

Niger is also expensive, over a dollar a pound, so you won't want to waste it. Buy a hanging tube with tiny holes, designed especially for niger, and hang it where you can see it from your best viewing window. Up close to the house, even under the eaves, is fine. Goldfinches will become very tame and won't mind your standing two feet from them, on the other side of the window, while they eat.

One of my favorite seeds for birds is **safflower**, a white seed, slightly smaller than a black sunflower seed. Squirrels don't like it. Neither do grackles, blue jays, or starlings.

I bit into a safflower seed myself once and found it extremely bitter. Cardinals, titmice, chickadees, and downy woodpeckers munch it like candy, though, so I keep a good supply available on the platform feeder. The squirrels don't bother to climb up there any more.

Another important seed is **white millet**, which is even cheaper than sunflower seed. I scatter it on the ground for sparrows, juncos, and mourning doves. One February the Lincoln's sparrow, which is rare in Iowa in winter, came to my yard every day for two weeks and ate the white millet.

## What not to buy

One caution. I'd like to warn you away from bags of mixed birdseed. These mixes usually contain a lot of filler, such as red millet. Most birds won't eat it. They rummage through the seeds in the feeder and kick the red millet onto the ground, where at best it lies until it rots and turns into pretty decent fertilizer for the grass. Mixed birdseed is not a bargain. Buy the seeds you know your birds want.



## Helping or hurting

Sometimes conscientious people are concerned about whether feeding the birds will harm the birds. Will the birds become dependent on the handouts? And it's often advised that one should only start feeding birds if certain that the feeding can continue uninterrupted all winter.

However, the evidence indicates that feeding is not likely to be bad for birds. They don't settle in and dine at just one place. Goldfinches, for example, follow a circuit each day, visiting a number of feeders and wild food patches, as we know from studies of banded birds that can be identified individually.

With many households feeding birds, it's unlikely that a bird will starve because one feeder goes empty. All the same, birds that come into your yard at dusk on a cold evening are hungry, and one does not like to disappoint one's guests

However, birds are most easily attracted in winter because natural food supplies are least abundant then. Feeders should be set up in late summer or early fall, then maintained through the winter and spring until natural food sources are again abundant.



Once you begin feeding birds in the fall, you have made a commitment. A feeder often attracts more birds to an area that natural food sources can support. Thus, if you stop feeding them, the birds might not be able to find enough food to survive. So, if you plan a vacation, be sure to have someone restock you feeder regularly while you are gone.

## OTHER ATTRACTIONS FOR BIRDS

Birds do not have teeth; instead, they grind food in their gizzards. Birds eat small pieces of sand and gravel, or "grit" to aid the grinding process. In winter, when the ground is covered by snow, suitable grit may be hard to find. You can supply grit to birds at the feeder in the form of crushed eggshells, coarse sand, or from boxes of grit that are sold at variety and pet stores.

Water in a bird bath or other container often attracts birds in spring and summer, but the costs of maintaining open water through the winter are not justified. Birds survive on water derived from foods they eat and from eating snow.

## **Going Beyond Bird Feeders**

If you want to do something even more significant to help the birds, something that will benefit them whether you are home to fill the feeders or not, then you can enhance the natural habitat in your yard. You have to have some plants in your yard anyway, so why not choose plants that are useful to birds?

The berries of the Washington hawthorn (at right) will attract birds through most of the winter. Viburnums also are good landscaping shrubs, because they can provide berries all winter.

And what about planting a patch of native flowers, such as coneflowers, and allowing them to go to seed and stand through the winter? You may look out some snowy day and see a flock of goldfinches on the seed heads. Another bird-friendly tree is a dense evergreen that will provide chilled birds with a refuge from cats or hawks and a place to get out of the wind.

Such amenities will attract uncommon species of birds to your yard and add considerable excitement to looking out your windows.

There is no reason that urban habitat should be sterile and useless to wildlife. Indeed, a habitat that provides naturally for the needs of wild birds is a very pleasant place for humans, too.

This kind of landscaping can add greatly to the value and enjoyment of your home. And if you ever want to sell, there's nothing like a yard full of singing birds to give a house curb appeal.