

FEEDING WINTER BIRDS

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In winter many kind-hearted people will put up feeders and watch the birds come to enjoy the free meals. There are hundreds of feeder designs to choose from, at a wide range of prices. But my neighbor simply throws seed onto the ground. Another person, however, has removed the lower half of his kitchen window and installed a two-foot glass-sided box so that his birds can come inside to eat. For many years my feeder was a pie plate nailed to an old tree stump.

Before you start to feed birds, you should consider the following: Do any of your neighbors feed birds? Will pigeons, squirrels, raccoons, or starlings be a problem? Will you be able to offer the birds the same amount of food each day until mid-April?

If your neighbors feed birds, ask them to list the species they have and to describe any problems. If you live in a thickly settled area, you will no doubt have trouble with pigeons. They are beautiful birds, but large, numerous and dirty. They eat until all of the seed is gone, and then they will roost on the roof of your house for hours, waiting for more feed. Pigeons have difficulty clinging to small perches, so they cannot eat from most of the small hanging feeders. Also, by placing chicken wire fences under the feeders, you can stop the pigeons from getting any grain that falls to the ground.

Squirrels are clever acrobats that can climb or jump onto most types of feeders. They have sharp teeth and can do much damage by chewing through the sides of feeders. About the only way to stop squirrels is to place baffle plates around the feeder posts or hangers. One fellow puts 12 in. phonograph records on the wires that hold his feeders. When a squirrel tries to climb over the records, they tip and turn until the thief falls to the ground.

Raccoons are large and so strong that they can rip feeders apart. If they become a problem, I recommend that you take your feeders indoors at night.

If you have cats in your neighborhood, I would suggest that you place your feeders in the open, 15 or 20 feet from any dense bush or other hiding place. Birds understand cats well, and it is usually the weak or injured that get caught. Birds will often eat within 20 feet of a sleeping cat. But when the cat wakes up, the birds will fly to a nearby tree and wait for it to leave.

Starlings and House (English) sparrows often become a problem, due to their large numbers. Anything that you do to discourage them, such as using wire cages or weight-sensitive perches, will also eliminate most of your choice birds. Yet, a diet of sunflower or thistle seed will help to keep them away, since they do not eat unshelled sunflower seed and are not fond of thistle.

Once you start to feed, put out the same amount of feed at about the same time each day. During severe weather, supply extra portions. After a few weeks, you should be able to ascertain the time it takes for the feeders to empty and how much money you want to spend. Ration the food daily, and let

the birds fight over it. Your local flock will quickly become established; they will know what to expect from you and what to expect from each other.

To start, I recommend three hanging-type feeders. Plastic ones that hold about a pint of seed are inexpensive and good looking. However, during freezing rain and snow, the openings that dispense the seeds are apt to become frozen. Feeders that have large openings are less apt to clog and will be easier to clean. Fill one feeder with thistle seed, one with sunflower seed, and the third with mixed wildbird feed and cracked corn.

Goldfinches, Pine siskins and redpolls will quickly take over the thistle seed feeder. Chickadees, Tufted titmice, Nuthatches, Evening grosbeaks, Blue jays and Purple finches will find the sunflowers, while Tree, Song, House, White-throated, and Fox sparrows, as well as Juncoes, Starlings and Cowbirds will go to the mixed feed.

In addition, suet will attract Downy and Hairy woodpeckers, Chickadees, Nuthatches, and unfortunately, Starlings. You can buy one of the many types of suet feeders, or you can simply put the suet into an onion bag and hang it from a tree branch. You can also make a suet holder by nailing an eight-inch square of hardware wire to a tree or a board, forming a pocket.

If you have Cardinals or Mockingbirds, or a rare wintering Catbird or Oriole, put up a flat shelf or window feeder. Cardinals love peanut hearts and shelled sunflower seeds, while the others will want raisins, grapes, suet, doughnuts, chopped apples and other fruit. Orioles also like sugar or honey-water in red containers.

Pheasants, Bob-white quail, Mourning doves, Ducks, and Geese will eat cracked corn or chicken scratch feed (cracked corn and wheat mixed) thrown on the ground.

You can save money by buying feed in 50 or 100 pound bags and storing it in covered galvanized rubbish cans. You may have to go to a grain dealer to get seed in quantity, though your local supermarket may be able to get it at a reduced price.

Remember, birds also need water during the winter: the colder it gets, the harder water is to find. Now there are good electric bird-bath heaters available for less than \$10. I shall never forget watching some Starlings splashing about in my heated bird bath one winter morning when the temperature was six below zero. They must have well-insulated, water-proofed feathers, because they didn't seem to mind the icicles that formed around the edge of the steaming bowl.