

WHAT TO FEED WILD BIRDS

What wild birds like to eat and what many commercial bird mixes contain are not always the same, according to a recent report by Dr. Aelred D. Geis of the Patuxent Wildlife Research Center.

His study, which is part of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Urban Wildlife Research Program, reveals some new findings on bird-food preferences--some apparently unknown to several of the birdseed companies that provide ready-mixed foods for millions of Americans who participate in this intensely interesting pastime.

"White proso millet and black oil-type sunflower seeds are eagerly taken," he said. "Yet, such common ingredients of commercial mixes as flax, canary, and rape (a type of mustard) seeds are rarely eaten by the birds."

These and other findings of the report are based on 179,000 observations of feeding habits of birds in the Washington-Baltimore area. Though surveys are being continued in Maine, Ohio, and California, Geis expects that bird-food preferences will be quite similar throughout the nation.

"Milo or sorghum, wheat, oats, cracked corn, and rice," Geis said, "are common ingredients in commercial mixes, but are rarely attractive to birds if sunflower seeds or white proso millet are also present in the feeder."

Geis discovered that another common ingredient in mixes, peanut hearts, was especially attractive to starlings, thus, should not be used as bird food. The small, oil-type sunflower seeds were found to be more attractive to most bird species than the larger black stripe sunflower seeds that are usually available.

Only Blue Jays and Tufted Titmice showed a preference for the larger seeds while a number of other species, notably Goldfinches and Mourning Doves, much preferred the smaller oil-type sunflower seeds.

"Since the kinds of birds that frequent people's homes vary from place to place," Geis said, "it is impossible to come up with a mixture that is universally efficient in terms of bird visits per dollar spent.

He recommends that such seeds as white proso millet and black oil-type sunflower, which are sought by birds, be purchased separately from feed or pet stores and presented as needed by the birds that are in the particular area.

Among the findings of the Geis report is the following list of birds and their favorite bird seeds:

- American Goldfinch--Hulled sunflower seeds, thistle seeds, and oil-type sunflower seeds
- Brown-headed Cowbird--White proso millet, red proso millet, German millet, and canary seed
- Cardinal--sunflower seeds of all types
- Carolina Chickadee--Oil-type sunflower seeds (showed little interest in other bird seed)
- Dark-eyed Junco--Red proso, white prosomillet, canary seed, and fine-cracked corn
- Common Grackle--Hulled sunflower seeds and cracked corn
- Evening Grosbeak--sunflower seeds of all types
- House Finch--Oil-type sunflower seeds (other sunflower seeds ranked much lower)
- House Sparrow--White proso millet (and most other seeds except flax and rape)
- Mourning Dove--Oil-type sunflower seeds, white proso millet, thistle, wheat, buckwheat, milo, canary seed, hulled oats, and cracked corn
- Purple Finch--Sunflower seeds of all types
- Red-bellied Woodpecker--Black-striped sunflower seeds (occasionally)
- Song Sparrow--White proso millet, red proso millet, and oil-type sunflower seeds
- Tufted Titmouse--Peanut kernels and oil-type sunflower seeds (showed no interest in millet)
- White-crowned Sparrow--Oil-type and black-striped sunflower seeds, white proso millet, and red proso millet (infrequent visitor to feeders)
- White-throated Sparrow--All sunflower seeds, white proso millet, and peanut kernels (also use red proso millet, canary seed, and fine cracked corn)

Bird feeders will find a great deal of valuable scientific information in Geis' report, Relative Attractiveness of Different Foods at Wild Bird Feeders, Fish and Wildlife Service Special Wildlife Report 233. Single copies are available free from the Publications Unit, Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of the Interior, Washington, D.C. 20240.

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