

GETTING THE MOST OUT OF SUNFLOWER SEED

by John E. Dennis

As a year round bait, sunflower seed is just about tops. Even when natural foods are plentiful in late summer and banding is at low ebb, sunflower seed will bring a ready response. The big drawback is the high cost. Many of us have overcome this by planting our own, but, as I have found through several year's experience, the growing, harvesting, and storing of sunflower seed present some knotty problems.

Few other plants are as easy to get started. Plant the seed twelve inches apart in rows spaced every two and one half feet. There are no exacting soil and fertilizer requirements, and the plants can stand considerable wetness or drought. They need plenty of sunlight and a moderately rich soil. The showy blossoms alone are a good reason for planting them. As the heads mature, the plants become top-heavy and, with a combination of rain and wind, are likely to fall over. One year, just before the heads were ripe, a storm all but ruined my crop. This year much the same thing happened, but I saved the day by propping up the fallen stalks with poles.

A mistake I have made in the past has been to allow the birds to take too large a share of seeds from the standing plants. One year they made away with two-thirds an acre. It would have been of more benefit to them to have received this extra food during the lean winter months. This year I was away when one planting matured. When I returned, much to my disgust, I discovered that English Sparrows had virtually stripped every head. This sparrow competition is something new. Fortunately I had a later planting elsewhere which yielded a good harvest despite the drought.

Once the heads are harvested we still have problems. They quickly attract rats and mice and will mildew and spoil if not properly dried. The best procedure, I find, is to place the heads on shelves in a dry room or shed open to the sunlight. There I leave them, after taking rodent control measures. I see no advantage at all in shucking out the seeds unless it is for convenience in storing. Birds seem to come quicker to the unshucked heads, and the effort required to pick the seeds out keeps them around longer. I use the smallest heads for banding trap bait.

In their great popularity, sunflower seed offer a problem as it seems impossible to supply enough of them. One difficulty is that many of the birds which take them have the food-storing habit. The White-breasted Nuthatches and the Tufted Titmice work tirelessly all day long storing away the seeds, and so do the Blue Jays to a lesser extent. I suspect that chickadees have this habit also. Whatever use they make of them, the seeds vanish so quickly that we have to dole out the heads rather sparingly.

Here in Virginia, sunflower seeds are a great favorite with the Downy Woodpeckers. This does not seem to be so true farther north. One fall they came to my planting daily. The seeds were carted away one at a time to poles or fence posts. I suspected the food-storing habit but discovered the birds were only seeking out suitable crevices in which to place the seeds so that they could then pound the husks off.

Most birds either pound the husk off or, like the finches, maneuver it between their mandibles until it splits apart. Mourning Doves swallow the seeds husk and all, and I have even seen Cowbirds do this. Smaller birds, such as Song Sparrows and Towhees, can readily split the husks, but Pine Siskins seem to depend largely upon tidbits which the other birds leave behind. Towhees place the seeds edgewise in their mandibles so that it either splits open or goes shooting out with some force.

Some banders have had considerable success in catching birds which came to sunflower plants to feed. By placing traps in the rows, baited either with water or with sunflower heads, they catch such birds as Goldfinches and, in northern latitudes, Crossbills. I have had no luck along this line. Whenever I have placed traps in sunflower plantings, I have failed to take the birds coming to the plants for seeds. For instance, I have yet to take a Goldfinch in a banding trap here in Virginia; this is in contrast to Massachusetts where I banded nearly three hundred during one winter alone, all in seed-baited traps. But, it is a different story when sunflower seeds are made available in wooded situations. Not only do all the woodland birds which have been coming to the fields for sunflower seeds make their appearance but so do the sparrows and other birds of more open situations.

While I do not recommend sunflower seed as a sole source of food

at the feeding or banding station, I do suggest it as one of the best baits for year round use and one of the most economical when home grown.

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STILL MORE ABOUT BAND SIZES

In a number of the recent issues of EBBA NEWS, there have been a number of communications dealing with the proper size bands to use on various species of birds, especially in so far as members have taken exception to the suggested sizes which the banding office has offered in various of their publications. In all fairness to the central office, it should be pointed out that their list of suggested sizes is based on information sent to them by banders in the field and that they have appealed to banders to bring to their attention any obvious misinformation which may have appeared. It is to be hoped that the various suggestions offered in this publications by many persons will assist them in revising their list for future publication.

Before proceeding further with discussion of the topic of band sizes, attention should be drawn to the provocative article in the current issue of BIRD-BANDING by EBBA member Dr. Charles H. Blake of Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Biology Department. This article is in the January, 1954 issue (Vol. XXV, No. 1, pp. 11-16). In passing, it should be remarked that the Editor of this excellent journal is EBBA member E. Alexander Bergstrom.

From Frank Frazier, EBBA TREASURER, comes the following note: "With regard to using size 0 on Juncos, I am entirely in accord with C. Hapgood Parks. (This is contrary to the recommendation of Dr. Blake (EBBA NEWS, May-June, 1953, pp. 6-7) that size 1 be used for the Junco; in the same communication he recommends size 1B for the Song Sparrow, exception to which is taken below. It would appear to the Editor that further study of the problem of leg sizes is indicated, for, as suggested by Dr. Blake (Op. cit.), it is possible that different populations vary in tarsus size. Before undertaking such studies, members are urged to consult Dr. Blake's article in BIRD-BANDING cited above.)

Mr. Frazier continues, "I have banded more than 1900 Juncos in