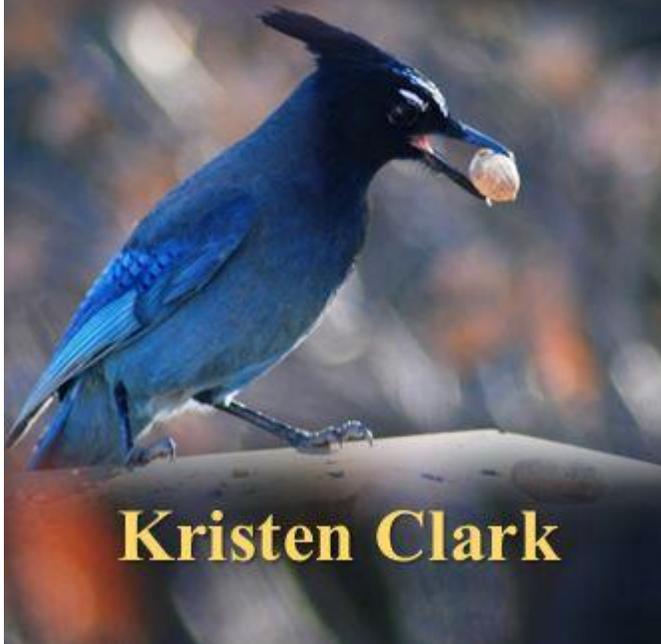


BIRDS EAT FREE AT MY HOUSE

By Kristen Clark

The Special Care & Feeding of Backyard Birds



Kristen Clark

This report is sponsored by Kristen Clark, author of *The Special Care & Feeding of Backyard Birds*, now available on Amazon and Barnes & Noble.

Photographs in this report were taken from the backyard of Kristen Clark's cabin in Tijeras, New Mexico or her home in Houston, Texas.

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OPENING COMMENTS

According to a recent Census Report, over 65 million Americans enjoy backyard bird feeding as a convenient way to enjoy wildlife.

What has made watching birds the fastest growing hobby in the country, second only to gardening? Whatever it is, watching birds, like watching fish or other animals, seems to make people feel good.

How do our "hand-outs" affect the birds? Little research has been done on that question. But we do know that some birds -- cardinals, mockingbirds and tufted titmice -- have extended their winter range northward, perhaps because of an increased availability of food at feeding stations. There is no indication however that backyard bird feeding has had a negative effect on wild bird populations as a whole.

Backyard bird feeding can, however, have an adverse effect on an individual bird. There may be a higher incidence of disease and birds injured by flying into windows. You can take precautions to minimize these problems.

GETTING STARTED

No matter where you live, you can put food outside your door, and some creature, feathered or furred, will show its appreciation and make an appearance. That's all it takes. Once you get started, it's hard to stop.

Before you know it, you're learning bird names. After a while, you'll start to recognize individuals and the messages in their behavior and song.

When you get to the point where you want to attract and "keep" a particular species, what you do will be determined by where you live, and the time of year. For example, on any winter day, you're likely to see a cardinal at a sunflower feeder in Virginia, a goldfinch at a thistle feeder in Massachusetts and hummingbirds at a nectar feeder in southern California.

How can you find out which birds to expect? A bird field identification book has pictures of different birds and will help you find the names for the birds you're likely to see.



FEEDER SELECTION

When the ground is covered with snow and ice, it's hard to resist just tossing seed out the door. But it's healthier for the birds to get their "hand-outs" at a feeding station, off the ground.

Regardless of the season, food that sits on the ground for even a short time is exposed to potential contamination by dampness, mold, bacteria, animal droppings, lawn fertilizers and pesticides.

It's best, for the birds' sake, to use a feeder.

You can start simply with a piece of scrap wood, elevated a few inches above the ground. Add a few holes for drainage and you've built a platform feeder. It won't be long before the birds find it.

Whether you buy one or build one, eventually you'll find yourself looking at commercially manufactured feeders. There are literally hundreds to choose from. How do you make the "right" choice? What makes a feeder "good?"

Placement

Where do you want to watch your birds? From a kitchen window... a sliding glass door opening on to a deck... a second story window?

Pick a location that has year-round easy access. When the weather's bad and birds are most vulnerable, you may be reluctant to fill a feeder that isn't in a convenient spot near a door or accessible window.

Also consider the "mess" factor. Pick a location where discarded seed shells and bird droppings won't be a clean-up problem.



Put your feeder where the squirrels can't reach. Those cute little rodents seem to like sunflower and peanuts as much or more than acorns. Squirrels become a problem when they take over a bird feeder, scaring the birds away, and tossing seed all over.

What's worse... frustrated squirrels have been known to entertain themselves by chewing right through plastic and wooden feeders.

If you've seen squirrels in your neighborhood, it's safe to assume they will visit your feeder. Think long and hard before you hang anything from a tree limb. Squirrels are incredibly agile, and any feeder hanging from a tree, with or without a squirrel guard or baffle, is likely to become a squirrel feeder.

In the long run, a squirrel-proof feeder or any feeder on a pole with a baffle is the least aggravating solution. The most effective squirrel-proof feeder is the pole-mounted metal "house" type.

If you must hang a feeder, select a tube protected with metal mesh. Most plastic "squirrel-proof" feeders, despite manufacturers' claims, may eventually succumb to rodent teeth.

If you have the "right" situation in your yard, a pole with a baffle should suffice. Any wood or plastic feeder can be effective when mounted on a pole with a plastic or metal baffle, if the pole is at least 10 feet or more from a tree limb or trunk.

Once you've determined you're going to put your feeder, you're ready to go shopping. In addition to good looks, think about...

- ...how durable is it?
- ...will it keep the seeds dry?
- ...how easy is it to clean?

- ...how much seed will it hold?
- ...how many birds will it feed at one time?
- ...which species will use it?

Durability

There seems to be no end to the material used in making bird feeders. You can buy "disposable" plastic bag feeders; feeders made of cloth, nylon, vinyl and metal netting; clear, lexan, colored and PVC plastic tubes; ceramic and terra cotta; redwood, western cedar, birch, pine and plywood; sheet metal and aluminized steel; glass tubes and bottles.

How long a feeder lasts depends on how much effort you put into maintaining it, the effects of weather, and whether squirrels can get to it.

Dry Seeds

Water can get into any feeder regardless of how careful you are to protect it. Seed will spoil when it gets damp or wet. Cloth, vinyl, nylon and metal netting feeders are inexpensive, but they do not protect your seed. You can improve them by adding a plastic dome.

Most wood, plastic, ceramic and solid metal feeders will keep seed dry, but water can get into the feeding portals. Look for feeders with drainage holes in the bottoms of both the feeder hopper and the seed tray.

Even bowl-type feeders and trays with drainage holes will clog with seed and bird droppings. Add rainwater and you have an unhealthy broth. Look for shallow plate-like seed trays. The purpose of a tray is to catch dropped seeds while allowing spent seed shells to blow away.

Cleaning

Any zookeeper and cage bird owner will tell you, when you feed birds in a confined area, you have to expect bird droppings, feathers, an occasional insect or two and left-over food mess.

While you don't have to wash the feeder daily, you should clean it regularly.

Diseases like salmonella can grow in moldy, wet seed and bird droppings in your feeder tray and on the ground below. It's a good idea to move your feeders (just a foot or so) each season to give the ground underneath time to assimilate the seed debris and bird droppings.

Keeping your feeders clean should not become a major undertaking. The degree of maintenance required is directly related to the types of birds you want to attract.

A thistle feeder for goldfinches should be cleaned about once a month depending on how often it rains. Feeding hummingbirds requires cleaning at the very least, weekly, preferably more often -- two or three times a week. Sunflower and suet feeders may need to be cleaned only once a month.





Feeders made of plastic, ceramic and glass are easy to clean. Wash them in a bucket of hot, soapy water fortified with a capful or two of chlorine bleach, then give them a run through your dishwasher.

Use the same regimen with wood feeders, but substitute another disinfectant for the bleach so your wood won't fade.

Food Capacity

The ideal feeder capacity varies with your situation, and the types of birds you want to attract.

If you feed hummingbirds, big feeders are not always better. One hummingbird will drink about 2 times its body weight (less than an ounce) a day. Early in the season, hummers are territorial and won't share a feeder. A sixteen ounce feeder can be wasteful, or indeed lethal, because artificial nectar (sugar water) can ferment in the hot summer sun.

If you see only one hummer in your yard, a two ounce feeder is more than enough. On the other hand, if you live in the southwest, and have 34 hummers in your yard, a sixteen ounce feeder may not be big enough.

If you opt for a large volume seed feeder, be sure to protect it from the weather and keep it clean. If after months of use, the birds suddenly abandon your feeder full of seed, it's time for a cleaning.

How Many Birds

If too many birds at your feeder becomes a problem, you can control their numbers by putting out smaller amounts of seed, by using specialty seeds, or by using restrictive feeders.

If you fill your feeder only when it's empty, the birds will look for food elsewhere. They'll return as long as you continue to fill it.

You can virtually eliminate visits by birds you'd rather not see by offering seeds they won't eat. Be selective in your choice of seeds.

If you use more than one type of seed, put them in separate feeders. This will reduce wasted seeds, as birds will toss unwanted seeds out of a feeder to get to their favorites.

Birds that visit your feeder have very specific preferences. Most prefer sunflower. Some prefer millet. A few prefer peanuts. None seem to prefer the other grains used in the mixes: corn, milo, red millet, oats, wheat, and canary seed.

If you want to feed only cardinals, doves and white-throated sparrows, switch from black oil sunflower to safflower. If you want only finches and an occasional dove and white-throated sparrow, try niger thistle. If you want only jays, titmice and white-throated sparrows, try peanuts.





Another way to discourage unwanted birds is to use specialty feeders that for the most part, allow only "select" birds to feed.

The most non-selective feeders are the tray, platform or house feeders.

You can encourage small birds with feeders that restrict access. Wood feeders with vertical bars and feeders covered with wire mesh frustrate the larger birds.

Tube feeders without trays also restrict access to small birds. Remove the perches, and you've further selected only those birds capable of clinging -- finches, chickadees, titmice and woodpeckers.

Add vertical perches to tube thistle feeders, and you'll limit accessibility primarily to the goldfinches.

If starlings are a problem at your suet feeder, you can discourage them by using a suet feeder with access only at the bottom. Starlings are reluctant to perch upside down. Chickadees and woodpeckers don't find that a problem.

Species Variety

The species you attract is determined primarily by the seeds you offer.

Black oil sunflower is the hands-down favorite of all the birds that visit tube and house type feeders. White proso millet is favored by birds who visit platform feeders (doves and sparrows). Ducks, geese and quail will eat corn.

Many of the cereal grains (corn, milo, oats, canary, wheat, rape, flax and buckwheat) in mixed bird seeds are NOT favorites of birds that visit tube feeders.

Watch a feeder filled with a seed mix and you'll see the birds methodically drop or kick out most of the seeds to get to their favorite -- sunflower. Birds will also kick out artificial "berry" pellets, processed seed flavored and colored to look like "real" fruit.

Seeds that wind up on the ground are likely to be contaminated by dampness and bird droppings. If the birds don't eat them, rodents will.

The most effective way to attract the largest variety of birds to your yard is to put out separate feeders for each food:

- starling-resistant suet feeder
- a house feeder for sunflower
- a bluebird feeder
- a wire mesh cage feeder for peanuts
- a nectar feeder
- a tube feeder for thistle
- a stationary or tray fruit feeder
- a house or platform feeder for millet

FEEDERS AND THE BIRDS THEY ATTRACT

TUBE FEEDER WITH BLACK OIL SUNFLOWER

- Goldfinches
- Chickadees
- Woodpeckers
- Nuthatches
- Titmice
- Redpolls
- Pine siskins

ADDING A TRAY TO THE TUBE FEEDER WILL ALSO ATTRACT

- Cardinals
- Jays
- Crossbills
- Purple and House Finches
- White-throated and White-crowned Sparrows

TRAY OR PLATFORM FEEDER -- WITH MILLET

- Doves
- House sparrows



- Blackbirds
- Juncos
- Cowbirds
- Towhees
- White-throated, white-crowned, tree, and chipping sparrow

TRAY OR PLATFORM FEEDER -- WITH CORN

- Starlings
- House sparrows
- Grackles
- Jays
- Juncos
- Bobwhite quail
- Doves
- Ring-necked pheasants
- White-throated sparrows

PLATFORM FEEDER OR TUBE FEEDER AND TRAY -- with PEANUTS

- Cardinals
- Chickadees
- Grackles
- House finches



- Titmice
- House sparrows, white-throated sparrows, and sparrow
- Starlings
- Mourning doves
- Jays
- Juncos

NIGER THISTLE FEEDER WITH TRAY

- Goldfinches, purple finches, and house finches
- Redpolls
- Pine siskins
- Doves
- Chickadees
- Dark-eyed juncos
- song sparrows and white-throated sparrows

NECTAR FEEDER

- Hummingbirds
- Orioles
- Cardinals
- Tanagers
- Woodpeckers
- Finches
- Thrushes



HANGING SUET FEEDER

- Woodpeckers
- Wrens
- Chickadees
- Nuthatches
- Kinglets
- Thrashers
- Creepers
- Cardinals
- Starlings

PEANUT BUTTER SUET

- Woodpeckers
- Goldfinches
- Juncos
- Cardinals
- Thrushes
- Jays
- Kinglets
- Bluebirds
- Wrens
- Starlings

UNINVITED GUESTS

Once you get your bird feeding station up and running, you may run into problems with uninvited guests. These visitors fall into two categories -- those interested in the seeds (squirrels and chipmunks, rats and mice, starlings and house sparrows), and those interested in a bird for dinner (cats and hawks).

If you have trees, you will get to know squirrels. You may marvel at their antics, until they take over your bird feeders. Then you'll either love them or hate them.

Those who love squirrels tolerate their visits, and may even encourage them with special squirrel toys and feeders.

When a squirrel is at the feeder, you're not likely to see birds. Squirrels will scare off the birds while they eat the seed, and sooner or later, they'll eat the feeder too.

The simplest solution is the squirrel-proof feeder or pole, and storing your seed in a metal garbage can.

Chipmunks, rats and mice can also become a problem where there's seed spillage under the feeder. Don't use mixed bird seed, and if you don't have a squirrel problem, add a feeder tray.



Crow, house sparrow and starling problems can be eliminated by seed and feeder selection.

Cats are another story altogether. Feral cats and your neighbor's tabby are a serious threat to nestlings, fledglings and roosting birds. Too often, the presence of just one cat on the prowl near your feeder can take the enjoyment out of your backyard bird watching experience.

When a cat sits drooling under your feeder, you're not likely to see any birds. You're bound to feel much worse when you find a pile of feathers on the ground.

If your neighbor is reasonable, suggest a bell collar. If that doesn't work, consider getting yourself a pet -- a dog. Birds don't seem to be bothered by most dogs, but cats and squirrels are.

If there are no cats in your neighborhood and you find a pile of feathers near your feeder, look for a hungry hawk perching on a tree nearby.

Don't get upset. Consider yourself fortunate to see one, right in your backyard. Cooper's and sharp-shinned hawks eat birds and play an important role in the natural community.

Don't put out poisons, or try to trap them, since all birds of prey -- eagles, owls and hawks -- are protected by Federal law.





QUESTIONS ABOUT FEEDING WILD BIRDS

When's the best time to start?

There is no best or worst time. Start whenever you want to. The birds can use your help in the very early spring when their natural seed sources are scarce. In general, whenever the weather is severe, birds will appreciate a reliable supplemental food source.

When's the best time to stop?

If you enjoy feeding birds, there is no reason to stop. You can do it year-round. Feeding the birds throughout the summer will not make them "lazy," or "dependent." If you keep your

feeding station clean, there's no reason for you to stop feeding suet, sunflower, millet, fruit and nectar.

Is it best to stop feeding hummingbirds after Labor Day?

There is no evidence that feeding hummingbirds after Labor Day will keep them from migrating. In fact, it may help a weakened straggler refuel for the long haul. Leave your nectar feeders out until the birds stop coming.

How long does it take for birds to find a feeder?



Sometimes it can seem like forever. It may take more time for birds to find window feeders than hanging or pole-mounted feeders. If you're impatient, start with a feeder full of hulled sunflower. If that doesn't get their attention, wrap aluminum foil around the top of the feeder hanger. Sometimes all it takes is the reflection of light on the foil to catch their attention.

My feeder is full of seeds. I haven't seen a bird in months. Am I doing something wrong?

When birds desert your feeder, it may be simply that a lot of natural food is available nearby. Or something may be wrong, such as your seeds are spoiled or your feeder contaminated. Throw the seeds away and wash the feeder. Take a look at where your feeder is placed. Be sure it's not vulnerable to predators.

Won't birds' feet stick to metal feeders and perches in the wet winter weather?

Birds don't have sweat glands in their feet, so they won't freeze onto metal feeders. There's no need to cover any metal feeders parts with plastic or wood to protect birds feet, tongues or eyes.

Can birds choke on peanut butter?

There's no evidence that birds can choke on peanut butter. However, birds have no salivary glands. You can make it easier on them by mixing peanut butter with lard, cornmeal, and/or grit. Your birds will appreciate drinking water too -- a bird bath or trough.

Do wild birds need grit?

In the winter, you may see flocks of birds along roadsides after the snowplows have passed. They're after the grit. Birds have no teeth to grind their food. The dirt, sand, pebbles, and grit they eat sits in their crop and helps grind up their food. Adding grit to your feeder is helpful year-round, but particularly in the winter and spring. Crushed eggshells do the same thing, and in the spring have an added benefit. They provide extra calcium during nesting season.

Won't suet go "bad" in the summer?

In the winter, raw beef fat from the local butcher is all you need for your suet feeder. When temperatures rise, raw fat can melt, and get rancid. It's safer to use commercially rendered suet cakes in the spring and summer months. Rendering, boiling the fat, kills bacteria. And yes, it's okay to feed your woodpeckers year-round. They will visit your feeders all summer long, and they'll bring their babies.



What is hummingbird "nectar"? Do hummers need nectar fortified with vitamins and minerals?

Hummingbird nectar is nothing more than table sugar and water. You can make your own by adding 1/4 cup of sugar to a cup of boiling water. Hummers eat insects for their protein. There is no evidence that these tiny birds need vitamin and mineral supplements. There is also no evidence that adding red food coloring to nectar will harm the birds, but it probably is not necessary to attract them. Just put your feeder near red flowers. Please remember, sugar water will ferment when left in the hot sun. Fermented nectar is deadly. Do not put out a feeder if you are not willing to clean it at least weekly, preferably twice a week.

How can I avoid bees at my hummingbird feeder?

Bees are usually a problem only in hot weather. It's inevitable that bees will visit your hummingbird feeder. Little plastic bee guards may help keep them from getting nectar but it won't stop them from trying. Don't take the chance of contaminating your nectar by putting vegetable oil around the feeding portals. The safest solution is to add a few small feeders away from where people are likely to be bothered by bees.

How close to your window can you put a feeder?

Birds will come right to your window. Sometimes it takes a while for them to overcome their initial reluctance, so be patient. Don't worry that a feeder on the window will cause birds to fly into the window. Birds fly into the window because they see the reflection of the woods. Window feeders and decals can help break up the reflection.

If you find a bird that has hit a window, carefully pick it up and put it in a box or a large paper bag. Put it in a dark, quiet corner of your house for a couple of hours. If the bird recovers, take the box or bag outside and just let it go. If the bird comes to, but seems injured, call your local wildlife rehabilitation center for help.

I bought a bag of sunflower seeds early in the spring. Over the summer I noticed first worms, then moths. What can I do to keep the bugs out?

It's natural for moths to lay their eggs in sunflower seeds. The eggs lay dormant as long as the seeds are stored in a cool dry place. In the summer, seeds get hot and the eggs hatch.

The best way to avoid this problem is to buy seeds in smaller quantities, or store your seeds in a cool, dry place. It also helps to know where your retailer stores the seed. An air conditioned storage unit is the better choice.

Insects will also lay their eggs in burlap bags. Don't buy seeds in burlap bags. Don't buy seed in paper and plastic bags with patched holes. That may be a sign of insect or rodent infestations.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

A Field Guide to the Birds of North America by Robbins, Bruun, Zim and Singer. Golden Press, 1983.

Trees, Shrubs and Vines for Attracting Birds by Richard De Graff and Gretchen Wit. University of Massachusetts Press, 1979.

How to Attract Birds by Ortho Books, 1983.

A Complete Guide to Bird Feeding by John Dennis, Knopf, 1994.

The Bird Feeder Book by Donald and Lillian Stokes. 1987.

Summer Bird Feeding by John Dennis. 1988.

Woodworking for Wildlife by Minnesota Department of Natural Resources, 1987.

Planting a Refuge for Wildlife by Florida Game & Freshwater Fish Commission, 1986.