

**The Special Care
& Feeding of
Backyard Birds**



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In order to see birds it is necessary
to become part of the silence.

Robert Lynd

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OPENING COMMENTS

According to a recent Census Report, over 65 million Americans enjoy feeding birds in their own backyard as a convenient way to appreciate and study wildlife. Watching birds, like watching fish or other animals, seems to make people feel good, but how do our “hand-outs” affect the birds?

There is little research on this subject, but we do know that some birds, including cardinals, mockingbirds, and tufted titmice, have extended their winter range northward. Perhaps they are responding to an increased availability of food at feeding stations. And while there is no indication that backyard bird feeding has had a negative effect on wild bird populations as a whole, backyard bird feeding can have an adverse effect on an individual bird. For example, there may be a higher incidence of disease and birds injured by flying into windows.

Compiled from information provided by various government resources, along with my own personal experience, this book is designed to increase your backyard bird experience by helping you take precautions to minimize these problems

while attracting more birds to your yard. No matter where you live, you can put food outside your door and some fair feathered-friend will make an appearance and show its appreciation.



Red-Bellied Woodpecker

When you get to the point of wanting to attract a particular species, what you do will be determined by where you live and the season. 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. Pictures in this book should help serve that purpose to a degree, as well.

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

That's all it takes. Once you get started, it's hard to stop.

PREPARING YOUR BACKYARD

A habitat consists of the combination of food, water, shelter, and space arranged to meet the needs of wildlife. Even a small yard can be landscaped to attract birds, butterflies, beneficial insects, and small animals.

Trees, shrubs, and other plants provide shelter and food for wildlife. The plants you use for food and cover will help determine the wildlife species attracted to your backyard. Nesting boxes, feeders, and watering sites can be added to improve the surrounding.

Planning is necessary for an attractive and productive wildlife habitat, and trees and shrubs are the backbone of any landscaping design important for wildlife shelter. Many tree and shrub species are excellent sources of food, and proper selection of plant material can meet both the aesthetic needs of the homeowner and the food and shelter needs of wildlife.

Follow these critical steps in planning and creating your backyard habitat.

1. Identify all existing plants. Note the condition of the plants and their locations, including how much shade the trees and shrubs provide, which trees are evergreen, and which trees drop their leaves in the fall. Also, make a note of those trees considered a valuable food source.
2. Draw a sketch of your yard, including all existing plants, buildings, utilities, and pathways. You may even consider removing some plants, in which case you will want to explore options for plants that work well with your remaining species. The existing plants around your yard may be adequate to attract some wildlife, but a few changes can effectively enhance the existing habitat. Diversity in the landscape is necessary because some plants provide food but very little cover, while others provide cover but little food.
3. Add trees, shrubs, flowers, and ground-covers to your plan. However, not all the planting needs to be done at once. If money or time is limited, consider it a work in progress and invest at your own pace.
4. Plant trees first. Select evergreen species for year-round cover and shelter, fruit or

nut-bearing plants for a food source, and native species for natural adaptation to the local soil, climate, and wildlife. Additional considerations for choice and placement include: tree size, neighboring properties, and flowering or fruiting varieties which help provide seasonal food.

5. Fill in between the trees with smaller shade-tolerant trees and shrubs. Adding these to an existing landscape will enhance the vertical structure that is common in natural landscapes. Many smaller trees and shrubs are colorful in the spring when they flower, and provide berries for fall and winter feed.
6. Plant flowering annuals (plants that live one growing season) and perennials (plants that live for more than a year) to add color for attracting birds. If your yard is large, consider using part of it for tall native grasses that provide beauty as well as a natural source of food and shelter. A native wildflower garden provides the same function.
7. Avoid straight lines and perfect symmetry in your design. Wildlife is not particularly attracted to a well-manicured lawn. Make sure your habitat has curves and clumps of

vegetation to encourage the wildlife to come out into the open for viewing.

LANDSCAPING FOR BIRDS

While food and cover are essential for the survival of all species, loss of suitable nesting sites is a major factor in the decline of some bird species. For example, in the wild, many species nest in cavities of dead trees. With the removal of dead trees in towns and backyards, natural nesting sites are often limited.

Be aware of the value of dead, dying, and hollow trees, as well as logs on the ground, for birds and other wildlife. Dead trees provide homes to more than 400 species of birds, mammals, and amphibians. Consider leaving standing dead and dying trees in your yard unless they pose a human safety or property hazard, and use old logs and stumps in gardens and landscaping.

Additionally, some highly competitive, non-native species of birds have taken over some of the existing nesting sites once occupied by native birds, making your bird sanctuary more important than ever.

Below are some plant species to consider for wildlife habitat, but check with a local nursery on plants suitable for your area. Some of these

plants, while suited for wildlife, may have characteristics that make them inappropriate for small urban properties, such as shallow roots or weak limbs. Others may not be winter hardy in all locations.

Trees for Birds

- American beech
- American holly
- Balsam fir
- Black cherry
- Black gum
- Crabapple
- Flowering dogwood
- Hawthorns
- Hickories
- Live oak
- Oaks
- Red mulberry

Shrubs for Birds

- Common juniper
- Highbush blueberry
- Hollies -- both evergreen and deciduous
- Pyracantha
- Red-osier dogwood
- Serviceberry
- Spicebush
- Sumacs

- Viburnums
- Wax myrtle

Vines for Birds

- American bittersweet
- Trumpet honeysuckle
- Strawberry
- Trumpet creeper or vine
- Virginia creeper
- Wild grape

Nectar Plants for Hummingbirds

- Aster
- Azalea
- Bee balm
- Butterfly bush
- Butterfly weed and other milkweeds
- Cardinal flower
- Clover and other legumes
- Columbine
- Coneflower
- Delphinium
- Fuchsia
- Honeysuckle
- Jewel weed
- Lobelia
- Lupine
- Penstemon

- Phlox
- Salvia
- Trumpet creeper or vine
- Weigela
- Zinnia

Additional Food and Shelter for Birds

Few yards will be able to supply sufficient food or shelter for a variety of birds all year long. However, you can improve shelter and food supplies by building or purchasing feeders and houses, and by setting out certain foods.

It's important to note that your yard might not accommodate certain species. For instance, Eastern bluebirds prefer nesting sites that border open fields or lawns with a tree or fence post nearby to provide feeding perches. Chickadees prefer to nest in brushy wooded areas.

Before setting out nesting houses, find out which species are common in your area and can be encouraged to nest in your yard. Make or buy a bird house specifically designed for the bird you wish to attract, paying special attention to the size of the entrance hole, box size, height above the ground, direction the entrance hole faces, and amount of sunlight. Boxes may need baffles or other protective devices to limit access by cats

and other predators.

Many species of birds can also be attracted by a variety of feed in different styles of feeders. There are many styles of bird feeders available, from window-mounted feeders to those that hang from branches and stands. Many birds will readily eat right off the ground.

Bird feed comes in a variety of choices; however, sunflower seeds appeal to many birds, as well as small mammals. Woodpeckers, nuthatches, and chickadees are especially attracted to suet. Citrus fruit, chopped apples and bananas, and raisins will be eaten by numerous species, including robins, titmice, nuthatches, woodpeckers, and mockingbirds.

Feeders may also attract wildlife species you may not want to feed such as starlings, crows, and squirrels, making feeders, placement, and type of food an equal deterrent of unwanted species.

KRISTEN CLARK

BACKYARD BIRDS & THE
POETS WHO LOVED THEM

With Full-Color Photographs

By Kristen Clark

Available on Amazon.com

