

Feeders can provide food source to birds in the cold

By Emily Bohlin

Pumpkin spice and flannel are upon us. We are drawn indoors, but we are still looking out the window. If there is ever a good time of year to hang your bird feeders around the yard, it is now, during the winter months. Temperature extremes and migration periods are when resources are scarce for birds, and they could use the extra help.

But haven't all the birds flown south for the winter? Definitely not. There are many year-round residents like blue jays, juncos, and nuthatches. There are also cold hardy species that overwinter in Pennsylvania to escape much harsher winters farther north, such as pine siskins and American tree sparrows.

While some of the hardier species won't benefit much from bird feeders, there are many birds experiencing their first winter or who have decided not to migrate south due to mild winter conditions. These birds will likely take full advantage of your offerings.

Before setting up a winter bird feeding station, there are some things to consider. Putting up a feeder can attract a variety of species to one spot. Great! That's what you want, right? In nature these birds don't gather together at the same food source and with such regularity. This congregating can lead to infectious disease spread like avian conjunctivitis. This serious bacterial infection is transmitted when some species put their eyes up against contaminated tube feeders to dig for seeds. Here are some easy ways to minimize the spread of such contagious diseases.

Keep your feeders clean. The best practice is to disinfect your feeders with a 10% non-chlorinated bleach solution at least a few times a year.

If you don't want to use bleach, a good alternative is a 50-50 solution of white vinegar and water. Be sure to rinse them well after soaking in either disinfectant.

Another way to reduce disease spread is to offer a variety of seeds in a variety of feeders placed around your yard. Since some birds are ground-feeders and others forage in shrubs and in treetops, it is important to place feeders at multiple heights. This approach will reduce crowding and increase the diversity of backyard birds you see this winter. A win-win.

So what types of feeders should you put out this season? Here are some of Audubon's top picks.

Tube feeders

Perhaps the most popular choice, these cylindrical feeders offer multiple feeding ports and should be hung at least five feet off the ground. A tube feeder with small perches will limit your visitors to small birds while larger perches will welcome larger species. Fill with black oil sunflower seeds, peanuts, safflower, or mixed seeds, and you will attract cardinals, goldfinches, chickadees, titmice, nuthatches, house finches, purple finches, and siskins.

Suet feeder

Suet cakes are raw hard beef fat with nuts, fruits, and insects blended in. They are loved by insect-eating birds like woodpeckers, chickadees, titmice, nuthatches, warblers, and wrens. You can put suet in a durable cage feeder or in a net onion bag and hang it from a shrub or tree, but be sure it is out of reach from dogs. Only use suet during the cooler months as it will turn rancid if left out in warmer weather.

Hopper feeder

Another off-ground feeder, hopper feeders look like a little house with plexiglass sides that hold the bird seed and keep it dry. Fill with cracked corn, safflower, sunflower, or mixed seeds, and you will attract

grackles, cardinals, woodpeckers, jays, nuthatches, chickadees, and red-winged blackbirds.

Thistle feeder

If it's finches you want to draw in, hang a thistle feeder from a pole or in a tree. These feeders come in two main designs: a thistle sock which is a synthetic mesh bag, or a small tube feeder with tiny holes. Both are designed to dispense tiny Nyjer seed (also called thistle) to our small-beaked goldfinches, redpolls, pine siskins, house finches, and purple finches.

Ground-feeding table

This open or roofed screen tray sits inches off the ground to accommodate many ground feeding birds like juncos, towhees, doves, sparrows, cardinals, and goldfinches. The vulnerability of being at ground level can be mitigated by placing the feeder out in the open at least 10 feet away from trees and brush, so the birds can easily flee from approaching cats and other predators.

Remember that water is an important resource for avifauna year-round and can be scarce in wintertime. Consider keeping a bird bath out when most of the natural freshwater sources are frozen. There are a variety of heated bird baths on the market, including solar-powered ones.

Other ways to help birds in wintertime? Save the seeds and leave the leaves, as they say. Don't trim your dried flowers and seed heads. They provide a food source for birds all winter long. And no need to obsess over keeping a perfectly combed and bare lawn. Leaf litter is an excellent (and free) soil fertilizer as well as a micro-habitat for many invertebrates that birds eat.

Lastly, plant bird-friendly native vegetation around your property that birds can forage and use for shelter. Check out Audubon Pennsylvania's website for their "*Birdy Dozen*" of 12 native plants for

your property that are beneficial to birds
(<https://pa.audubon.org/conservation/2020-birdy-dozen>).

Happy bird feeding!

Photos by Wayne Laubscher

