

# One Way to Help Birds This Winter

By Sabrina Kirby

I confess: I am a reluctant cleaner of bird feeders. For years I imagined that keeping feeders filled with fresh, dry seed, periodically removing dropped seed and shells from the ground underneath, and disinfecting them at the end of the season—to avoid attracting bears, I feed only in winter—was sufficient. After all, the cardinals and nuthatches kept coming, and they looked healthy to me!

Then I started maintaining feeders year-round for my mom and made some discoveries:

1. Feeders are almost impossible to empty thoroughly after the seed has gotten wet.
2. The drainage holes most bird feeders have to allow water to drain from the seed hopper or tray don't necessarily do their job.
3. Wet seed inside the feeder and waste in the tray can ferment quickly, forming a gluey sludge—a perfect breeding ground for microbes.

I had to admit: if I were a bird, I probably wouldn't want to eat the seed in those feeders!

The best authorities on bird feeding, including the National Wildlife Health Center, Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology, and National Audubon Society, all recommend cleaning seed feeders every two weeks with a solution of 1 part chlorine bleach to 9 parts water, rinsing them with clean water, and allowing them to air dry. They suggest more frequent cleaning in warm and damp weather or times of heavy use. Cornell Lab's "Project Feeder Watch" further advises removing for two weeks any feeder visited by a bird who appears sick and cleaning the feeder once a week thereafter.

Twice a month--or *more*? Really?

Hoping for a loophole, I emailed my most knowledgeable bird-feeding friends to ask how often they clean their feeders. Two replied immediately: *Once a week*. Others hedged: "Probably not often enough." All described their methods—basically the same as above. My unscientific survey suggested that while not everyone might clean their feeders as often as advised, all agree cleaning matters.

Okay. Time to turn over a new leaf, give Mom's feeders a good cleaning, and make sure my own were ready for winter. On a nice October afternoon I assembled my materials on the driveway: feeders, garden hose, big plastic bin and four-gallon bucket, dish detergent and bleach, dish brush, old toothbrush, and assorted screwdrivers, pliers, and wrenches.

I soaked the feeders in warm soapy water to loosen the packed debris, then blasted them inside and out with the hose. At this point it became clear that I had to take some feeders apart to access all the seed stuck inside—an easier task than I expected!

Next, I measured 18 cups of water and two cups of bleach into the bin and soaked every surface of each feeder for approximately ten minutes. Since the used bleach solution was mostly clear of debris, I could pour it down a sink drain and into the water treatment system, not down the driveway and into the roadside ditch, where a family of green frogs helps with mosquito control.

Finally, I sloshed each feeder in a bucket of clean water and gave each a final rinse with the hose before letting them all air-dry overnight.

Day 2: Time for reassembly. My husband helped. There may have been swearing. I declared one leftover part unnecessary.

What I learned:

1. If at all possible, take the feeder apart. You'll save time in the long run.
2. But first, take pictures of the feeder so you'll know how it goes back together.
3. Notice I said "feeder," not "feeders." I suggest cleaning one feeder at a time—even if that means more cleaning sessions. Fewer feeders = less workspace, time, and drudgery per session = less procrastination?
4. Inspect each new feeder with an eye toward cleaning!

I admit, part of me still protests: Mother Nature doesn't use bleach and scrub brushes! True; but by making lots of highly appealing food easily available in a small area, I create a perfect environment for transmitting bacterial, viral, and fungal diseases—so I'm responsible for keeping that smorgasbord healthy.

But wait: do backyard feeders even help birds? Studies suggest they do, particularly during migration or in harsh winter conditions, when birds' caloric needs increase. And feeders may be helpful year-round, especially in cities or suburban neighborhoods with big yards and non-native plantings, where birds' natural foods are less available than they used to be.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service identifies "three big dangers" associated with bird feeding: "disease, predation, and collision." After trying many methods, I still can't completely prevent birds from striking my windows nor keep them safe from neighborhood cats. (Hawks are another story—they're birds who have to eat, too.) But at least I can work to prevent disease by keeping my feeders clean!

- 1) Red-bellied Woodpecker, by Carl Kirby
- 2) Tufted Titmouse shares a feeding station with a Black-capped Chickadee, by Deb Slade
- 3) Pair of Cardinals, Michael O'Conner, 2022 APA photo award

