

When managing birdfeeders, think bird health and safety

February 5 2019, by Dean Fosdick



This Aug. 16, 2015 photo taken near Langley, Wash., shows a Goldfinch perched on a seed-filled sunflower head just a few feet from a window bird feeder. Birds are more likely to come to bird feeders if there is some cover nearby. They'll be able to dodge back into the safety of the plants if predators show up. (Dean Fosdick via AP)

Feeding birds in winter is one of the nation's most popular wildlife-watching activities, yet many ornithologists say it's often more rewarding

for people than for birds. And it might even put wild birds at risk.

"Feeding [birds](#) is not necessary for their survival except in extreme weather conditions," said Stephen Kress, vice president for [bird conservation](#) at the National Audubon Society. "Feeders can definitely help them get through that kind of weather."

Most birds are insect eaters and aren't attracted to backyard feeders. "For those birds, I recommend planting natural habitat and native plants," Kress said.

Besides, birds who do eat seed "will be more likely to come to feeders if there is some cover nearby. They'll be able to feed and dodge back into the safety of shrubbery."

The most common error people make when managing bird feeders is incorrect placement—putting them in locations where birds are frightened by foot traffic, vulnerable to predation by cats, or at risk of flying into windows.

"If a feeder is within 3 feet of a window, it's better," Kress said. "If a bird is spooked, it won't be killed when it strikes the glass. And keep your cats indoors so they can't stalk vulnerable birds and animals."

Learn which [bird species](#) frequent your area so you can avoid feeder wars and understand the pecking order.

"Some birds are more aggressive at feeders," Kress said. "Their eating habits are such that they can consume a lot and not leave much for the others."

One answer to that is to feed at multiple locations using different kinds of seeds and feeders. Nyjer seeds, for instance, attract goldfinches, while

tube feeders with wire covers prevent large birds from entering.

Pay attention to seed quality and freshness. Unprotected seed left too long in feeders will turn moldy, and mold can kill foraging wildlife. Refresh your feeders every few days and clean them frequently by soaking in a solution of 10 percent bleach.



This Oct. 4, 2014 photo taken near Langley, Wash., shows a Northern Flicker feeding at an oversized suet feeder built especially for woodpeckers. Some birds are more aggressive eaters than others so it's wise to feed at different locations using different kinds of seeds and feeders. (Dean Fosdick via AP)

"You can feed more effectively and efficiently by using black-oil sunflower seeds, as it is the preferred seed by most feeder birds," said Adam Rohnke, a senior Extension associate at Mississippi State

University. "An added benefit is reducing waste seed (on the ground) from [seed](#) mixes which can attract rodents."

"Boost the number and diversity of bird species by providing different types of feeders to resemble their natural feeding behaviors," Rohnke said in an email. "For example, ground-dwelling birds such as doves, towhees and others prefer low platform feeders because they feed on the ground."

Along with black-oil sunflower and nyjer seeds, feeder-friendly birds like suet (woodpeckers, jays, songbirds), fruit (orioles, bluebirds, waxwings) and mealworms (robins, chickadees, wrens).

Do not feed [wild birds](#) anything salty (whole peanuts, crackers, potato chips) or food that could choke them (plain bread, fats).

Provide a steady supply of clean water but shop around for shallow birdbath designs. Most are too deep for birds, Kress said.

Placing a few large stones in a birdbath can provide perches.

"Hummingbirds like to bathe in leaves, so spray large leaves to attract them," Kress said.

More information: Online: For more about feeding birds, see this Stanford University fact sheet: web.stanford.edu/group/stanford.../Feeding_Birds.html

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Citation: When managing birdfeeders, think bird health and safety (2019, February 5) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2019-02-birdfeeders-bird-health-safety.html>

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