

Study finds people who feed birds impact conservation

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A dark-eyed junco, an American goldfinch, and a house finch feed on sunflower seeds on a snowy day. Bird watchers report that cold weather influences how much they feed birds, more so than time or money. Credit: Cynthia Raught, Virginia Tech

People in many parts of the world feed birds in their backyards, often

due to a desire to help wildlife or to connect with nature. In the United States alone, over 57 million households in the feed backyard birds, spending more than \$4 billion annually on bird food.

While researchers know that bird feeding can influence nature, they do not know how it influences the people who feed those birds.

"Given that so many people are so invested in attracting birds to their backyard, we were interested in what natural changes they observe at their feeders beyond simply more birds," said Ashley Dayer, an assistant professor in the Department of Fish and Wildlife Conservation in the College of Natural Resources and Environment at Virginia Tech. "In particular, we wanted to know how they respond to their observations. For example, how do they feel if they see sick birds at their feeders, and what actions do they take to address these observations?"

Researchers Ashley Dayer and Dana Hawley of Virginia Tech recently published their findings in *People and Nature*, a new journal published by the British Ecological Society.

The study was conducted in collaboration with researchers from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the Odum School of Ecology at the University of Georgia.

The researchers analyzed how people who feed birds notice and respond to natural events at their feeders by collaborating with Project FeederWatch, a program managed by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology that engages more than 25,000 people to observe and collect data on their backyard birds.



A birdwatcher fills the feeders in her backyard. Here, she will observe birds and other natural events, which her feeding may contribute to. Credit: L. Williams, Virginia Tech

Using a survey of 1, 176 people who feed birds and record their

observations of birds in the Project FeederWatch database, the researchers found that most people noticed natural changes in their backyards that could be due to feeding, including an increase in the number of birds at their feeders, a cat or hawk near their feeders, or a sick bird at their feeders.

"More and more, we see that humans are interacting less with nature and that more of our [wildlife](#) are being restricted to areas where there are humans around. Looking at how humans react to and manage wildlife in their own backyards is very important for the future of wildlife conservation and for understanding human well-being as the opportunities for people to interact with wildlife become more restricted to backyard settings," said Hawley, an associate professor in the Department of Biological Sciences in the College of Science. Hawley's research program at Virginia Tech focuses on wildlife disease ecology and evolution.

"From my 17 years working with people who feed birds as part of citizen science projects, I've heard a great deal about their impactful observations at their feeders," said co-author David Bonter, director of Citizen Science at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. "This study provides important information about the breadth and pattern of these experiences through responses of over 1,000 participants. The findings will help us at Project Feederwatch improve how we work with bird watchers toward our shared goal of bird conservation."

The people who feed birds also responded, particularly to cats at their feeders, by scaring off the cats, moving feeders, or providing shelter for birds. When observing sick birds, most people cleaned their feeders. When observing more birds, people often responded by providing more food. Fewer people acted in response to seeing hawks; the most common response to this was providing shelter for the feeder birds. These human responses were, in some cases, tied to peoples' emotions about their

observations, particularly anger. While cats near feeders most commonly evoked anger, sick birds led to sadness or worry. Emotions in response to hawks were more varied.

"Feeding [wild birds](#) is a deceptively commonplace activity. Yet, it is one of the most intimate, private, and potentially profound forms of human interaction with nature. This perceptive study uncovers some of the remarkable depth associated with bird feeding and discerns that people who feed birds are alert to a wide range of additional natural phenomena," said Darryl Jones, a professor at the Environmental Futures Research Institute and School of Environment and Sciences at Griffith University in Australia, who was not connected to the study.

One surprising result that the researchers found in this study was that when deciding how much to feed birds, people prioritized natural factors, such as cold weather, more than time and money. Most people believed that the effects of their feeding on wild birds was primarily good for birds, even though many observed and took action in response to natural events in their backyard that could impact the health of the birds and might partly result from their feeding.

"Overall, our results suggest that people who feed birds observe aspects of nature and respond in ways that may affect outcomes of feeding on wild birds. More work is needed to fully understand the positive and negative effects of feeding on wild [birds](#) and, thereby, the people who feed them," said Dayer, whose research focuses on the human dimensions of [wildlife conservation](#), applying social science to understand human behavior related to wildlife.

More information: Ashley A. Dayer et al, Observations at backyard bird feeders influence the emotions and actions of people that feed birds, *People and Nature* (2019). [DOI: 10.1002/pan3.17](https://doi.org/10.1002/pan3.17)

Provided by Virginia Tech

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