

Study explores changing design of birdfeeders as influenced by unwanted guests

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Credit: Heta Lähdesmäki

The first birdfeeders were made in the 19th century, and their design

rapidly evolved during the 20th century. Researchers at the University of Helsinki and Aalto University consider the evolution of the birdfeeder to be an example of multispecies design, where unwanted guests have shaped the human-made artifact. Their study is [published](#) in *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space*.

Bird feeding is a common hobby in many Western countries and has been studied extensively. Nevertheless, birdfeeders have been studied less, despite being a crucial material part of bird feeding practices.

The researchers noted four major changes in birdfeeder [design](#): first, a roof was placed on top of the feeding board, secondly, the birdfeeder was placed on top of a high stick or was hung from a high place, thirdly, the slit where food was available was reduced in size, and fourthly, automated feeders became much more common.

The research conducted at the University of Helsinki and Aalto University suggests that the reason for these design choices was more concerned with excluding species from the feeder rather than feeding birds.

"We argue that a birdfeeder is not essential for feeding birds, as food can simply be thrown on the ground. Birdfeeders were designed to keep unwanted guests, such as rats, corvids, or salmonella, away, so that small-sized birds can obtain more food and are kept safe," says the first author of the paper, postdoctoral researcher in [cultural history](#), Heta Lähdesmäki from the University of Helsinki.

Earlier research has shown that the users of artifacts and technology shape the design of the artifacts. This research used descriptions of birdfeeders and guidelines for bird feeding and birdfeeder structures

issued in Finnish newspapers and magazines from the end of the 19th century until the end of the 20th century.

The transdisciplinary research combined approaches from [environmental history](#), environmental humanities, design studies, and studies of technology and science to uncover the role of other species than humans in the evolution of technological artifacts.

The phases in the evolution of birdfeeder design were clear and discreet

In the first stage, at the turn of the 20th century, a roof was added to the designs, to keep snow and rainwater away from the food. From the 1910s onward, the birdfeeder was suggested to be placed either hanging or on top of a long stick, to prevent cats that were hunting birds or rats that were after the birdfeed from reaching the birdfeeder.

In the 1930s, birdfeeder slits for seeds were recommended to be kept small enough to prevent larger-sized birds from accessing the feed. During the [final phase](#), from the 1970s onwards, Salmonella and other pathogens began worrying people and birdfeeder design began prioritizing easy cleaning and keeping bird feces away from the feeder.

"The evolution in birdfeeder design is a story of reciprocal actions, where humans want to prevent some species, such as the rat, from accessing birdfeeders by modifying the structure, after which the rats test whether the modification was efficient.

"The bird table design concurrently tells us a great deal about the changing attitudes towards species in our own backyards, when additional species are perceived to be problematic," says senior author, Academy Research Fellow, ecologist Tuomas Aivelo, University of

Helsinki.

"Many articles concerning birdfeeders and bird feeding have been published in Finnish newspapers and magazines, and bird feeding is clearly a dear hobby for many people. While a great deal has been written about welcome guests, such as various endangered species, unwanted guests also elicit an equally passionate discourse. Especially Salmonella has led people who use the 'wrong' type of old-fashioned birdfeeders to be branded as the worst threat to small-sized birds," Lähdesmäki says.

More information: Heta Lähdesmäki et al, Bird feeding devices exclude unwelcome visitors. More-than-humans shaping the architecture and technology of birdfeeders in twentieth-century Finland, *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* (2024). [DOI: 10.1177/25148486241242680](https://doi.org/10.1177/25148486241242680)

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