

Why Attract Birds?

Birds are one of the few forms of wildlife we intentionally invite into our yards, but why? We are enthralled by their beauty and their songs, and we know many species help us control the pests that eat our crops and ornamental plants. Also, as natural habitats continue to shrink due to human population growth, our backyard habitats help sustain bird populations. Finally, attracting birds is just plain fun!

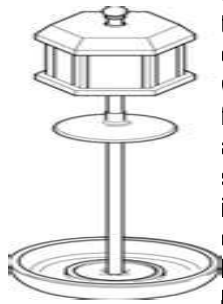
What Do Birds Need?

If we wish to attract birds, we need to provide shelter, housing, food, and water.

Food and Water for Birds

Feeding birds is probably the first thing people consider when attracting birds. Many people who do not consider themselves birdwatchers throw out breadcrumbs or provide seeds for birds.

Most birds we wish to attract to our property eat either seeds or insects, although there are many species that will eat either, especially during the winter. The most traditional food for insect eaters is suet, an animal fat. A very acceptable substitute is lard. Another choice is peanut butter, especially the chunky variety. A lard/peanut butter blend is especially good, but vegetable shortenings are not effective or nutritious.



It is a good idea to melt the fat and mix it with breadcrumbs, cornmeal, or bird seeds. While it is still soft, the mixture can be spread on a tree trunk or pushed into holes drilled into a branch.

The best seed for attracting birds is sunflower. There are several kinds: the black oiler variety is

reportedly the best. Nyjer seed (erroneously called “thistle”) is very good for attracting most finches. Millet, cracked corn, and peanuts are all good choices, too. Be aware that inexpensive mixes contain a large amount of milo seed, which few birds seem to eat.

Peanuts are excellent for birds. Woodpeckers, jays, nuthatches, chickadees, and titmice will readily visit a feeder for this high-protein, high-energy food. Even cardinals and finches will eat peanuts, but be sure they're de-shelled, dry-roasted, and unsalted.

You can fill any sunflower seed feeder with safflower, which many species, especially cardinals, eat. Avoid putting this seed on the ground in wet weather since it can quickly become soggy and inedible. Look for it in bulk at seed and feed stores.

A variety of bird feeders are sold, and some, notably the “squirrel-proof” designs, are worthwhile, as are the thistle feeders. However, just throwing handfuls of seed directly on the ground attracts many species, such as sparrows, doves, and cardinals.

Very good feeders can be made out of such items as milk cartons, plastic bottles, plastic bowls and saucers, and other recyclables. An Internet search will reveal a variety of designs.

Water is especially important in attracting birds, especially in the summer. Commercial birdbaths are very good, but any large, shallow container works well once birds discover it. Dripping water is especially attractive to birds, and some people hang buckets with a tiny hole in it over a birdbath: the slow drip attracts birds.

Finally, some species eat fruit. Chopped apples are a relatively inexpensive choice. In spring, orioles and some other birds are attracted to orange halves

presented on a stake.

Houses for Birds

In most communities, dead trees are removed, but these trees provide nesting sites for a number of species, including woodpeckers, wrens, chickadees, and some swallows. The competition for the remaining holes is fierce, and aggressive: nonnative starlings and House Sparrows often usurp native birds. Providing nest boxes helps relieve the competition, even in more natural areas.

Each species has its preferred box size, and specific directions for each species are available in books and online. The highly decorated birdhouses sold in many garden stores are much more attractive to us than to the birds, so it is good to remember to keep the boxes simple and unadorned.

Many species do not nest in boxes. Robins and a few others will nest on simple ledges and shelves that can be mounted under eaves and in corners.



Also, providing nest-building materials in the form of string, hair, lint fluff, and feathers helps local birds build nest.

When putting up nest boxes, remember that each species has its preferred height. Consult one of the books listed at the end of this leaflet for the specifics, but eight to ten feet above ground is usually good.

Planting for Birds

In general, native plants are better for attracting birds than nonnative species. One reason for this is that most small birds feed their young insects, even if the species is a seedeater. Insects usually feed on very specific plants, so if those plants are not available, neither are the insects. This is especially true as regards moths. Their larva (caterpillars) are

a major source of food for birds. Trees such as Norway Maples (or almost any tree or plant labeled “pest resistant”) do not host caterpillars. No caterpillars means no (or fewer) birds! Think of it this way: Flowers are a “punch bowl” for butterflies, but trees are a “salad bowl” for caterpillars. And caterpillars are a “buffet table” for birds!

Among the trees most commonly recommended for a bird-friendly environment, larches, mesquites, maples, oaks and willows lead the list. Oak trees are especially attractive because not only do their acorns attract many birds, but their leaves host a wide variety of species of caterpillars. Warblers have specialized in feeding in oak trees: some species towards the top, others at the base; some at the tips of branches, others closer to the trunk.

Many species of birds eat fruit, so planting trees and shrubs that bear fruit will attract these species. Some species, such as robins, survive the winter in the Chicago area by feeding on berries. Of course, many fruit-bearing plants are attractive to insects, which is good for birds. Trees that provide fruit for human consumption are popular for birds: many different apple, pear, cherry, peach, apricot, and plum trees will attract birds as well as providing a sweet snack for hungry birders. Almost any plant with “berry” in its name is a good choice, but be careful with nonnative plants, such as Japanese Honeysuckle. Research has shown that while birds really like its berries, the berries provide very little nutrition.

Of course, many birds feed on seeds; so planting a variety of grasses and forbs provides food for these species. Highly recommended flowers include Aster, Calendula, Cockscomb, Coreopsis, Cornflower, Cosmos, Larkspur, Portulaca, Purple Coneflower, Snapdragon, Sunflower, and Zinnias.

To attract hummingbirds, use plants with red, tubular flowers. These work well: Beebalm (*Monarda*), Begonia, Bouganvillea, Canna, Cardinal Flower, Columbine, Coral Bells, Dahlia, Delphinium,

Foxglove, Fuchsia, Gladiolus, Wild Geranium, Hibiscus, Hollyhock, Honeysuckle, Impatiens, Indian Blanket (*Gaillardia*), Indian Paintbrush, Lantana, Nasturtium, Nicotiana, Sage, Salvia, Scarlet Penstemon, Petunia, and Trumpet creeper.

Other Considerations

Health and safety are important in a bird-friendly yard. Make sure your feeders and birdbaths are kept filled and clean. Domestic cats are a leading cause of bird deaths in the United States (American Bird Conservancy estimates 3.7 billion birds are killed by cats each year), so keep your cats indoors and discourage strays. Bird strikes against windows kill millions of birds; placing feeders about three feet from windows, using nonreflecting glass, and placing hawk silhouettes on windows all discourage strikes. Natural predators, such as hawks, sometimes take small birds at feeders, but only seldom. Brush piles made from fallen branches and trimmings placed at the back of a lot offer shelter to small birds when these predators are hunting.

Additional Reading

There are many good books offering advice on attracting birds, include some region-specific publications. There is also good advice available online. The following books are worthwhile:

Darke, Rick, and Doug Tallamy. *The Living Landscape*. (2014)

Seidenberg, Charlotte. *The Wildlife Garden: Planning Backyard Habitats*. (1995)

Tallamy, Doug. *Bringing Nature Home*. (2009)

Terres, John K. *Songbirds in Your Garden*. (1977)

Attracting Birds: Suggestions for Attracting Birds to Your Property



by
John Cebula

Visit
“John’s Natural DuPage”
at facebook.com/naturaldupage

© 2016 by John J. Cebula