

Create a Bird Friendly Yard

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Have you noticed that the birds around your house have changed as the weather has cooled down? My hummingbird feeder is long gone since the wee birds have moved on to a warmer climate.

Fall and winter bird feeding can benefit birds and create some exciting bird watching opportunities from the warmth of your house. You don't need to wait until there's snow on the ground to start feeding your neighborhood birds. In the fall, there are still plenty of wild food options for the birds but they are also starting to scout out feeders so they are ready when the cold weather arrives. The birds know they need to be ready so they are checking out your neighborhood so they will be ready when they need some supplemental food. If you wait until the freezing weather arrives, the birds will go where they know the food is; they won't have the time and energy to explore for food in your backyard.

In the winter time, their caloric needs will increase just as natural food sources become limited; feeding birds can be the most beneficial for them this time of year. Birds, like all wildlife, need three things... food, water and shelter. Having native plants in our yards is the best offering we can make to our native birds. If you want to add a little something extra to the landscape, you should include the following essentials: high-quality bird seed, fresh water for drinking and bathing and plenty of cover.

There are many types of feeders and food on the market. Choosing the right combination of feeders and food will determine the birds you are attracting. Some of the bird seed that can be purchased at big box or grocery stores are mostly fillers. Choose a food with high quality ingredients such as black oil sunflower seeds, white proso millet, safflowers and raw peanuts. Birds that are ground feeders, like doves and juncos, will also like cracked corn. When feeding thistle, be sure to use a feeder that is specially designed for it.

There are many types of feeders to choose from. Choose one, or a variety, depending on which birds you'd like to encourage into your yard and how much space you have.

- Ground feeders are just what they sound like. They are screened bottom trays that sit close to the ground and keep food and bird droppings from making contact with each other. Place these feeders in open areas at least 10 feet from the closest tree or bush to give the birds a chance to flee from predators.
- Sunflower seed feeders are a great choice if you're going to have just one feeder in your yard. The feeder should be at least five feet off the ground and near a window so you can enjoy the birds! You should see titmice, nuthatches, chickadees and siskins.
- Suet feeders are favorites of nuthatches, woodpeckers and other insect eating birds. Suet is made from animal fat and is a great addition to seed feeders when there aren't many insects around. Hang one from a tree or a pole near other feeders.
- Thistle feeders are designed specifically for thistle. The seed can only be accessed by small-beaked finches.

You might even attract some non-birds as well. I have never met a squirrel who wasn't interested in bird food so if you have squirrels in your yard, consider purchasing a squirrel proof feeder or buy enough food

to keep the squirrels fed too. In the warmer months, we discourage feeding birds in areas where bears can get to the feeders. Bird seed, suet and hummingbird food are some of their favorite foods and we often find nuisance bears have been enjoying the food left for the birds.

If you have as many leaves and limbs in your yard as I do right now, you'll like what I have to say next! How about making a brush pile where birds can nest, perch or use as a hiding place from predators. Leave dead trees where they stand, if safe. The birds will love to eat the bugs that live in decaying wood. A cavity-nesting bird might even move in. Create a brush pile for ground dwelling birds, like sparrows. Inside the brush pile, they can hide and find protection from the winter weather. Use thicker branches as your base and add thinner ones as a "roof." Now you know what to do with your Christmas tree after you take it down! I'm giving you permission to skip tidying up your yard this winter. Rake your leaves under your shrubs and they will act as mulch and will give insects a nice warm place to live and the birds some nice bugs to eat! In the spring, the dead plant material might make some good nest building materials! Let your annuals stay in the garden, even after they have died. Leave them so that the birds can find the seeds!

Remember, bird feeders can also create a risk for birds that are using the feeders. When you are attracting many birds to your yard you will also attract their predators as well. These can be wild predators or house cats. Please always keep cats indoors. If you know you have feral cats in your area, you might not want to increase your backyard birds. Disease can also be spread through feeding stations so it's important that you keep the feeders clean and disease free. Feeders and birdbaths need to be cleaned at least twice a month (I'd recommend once a week) to reduce the chance of avian disease transmission. Use a solution of 90% water and 10% bleach to clean them. Birdbaths should be dumped out and refilled every day. Prevent window strikes by birds by putting up window decals to keep them from flying into them. Birds see the reflection of the trees outside in the window and fly directly into the window not knowing it's a solid object.

Once your feeders are up, you can sit back and enjoy the birds. You might want to consider getting a bird identification book so you can identify all the great birds in your yard.