

Feeding songbirds

We often are asked for advice about feeding birds, and hope the following information will answer some of the most common questions and concerns.

Traditionally, feeding birds has been a winter hobby. How many of us used to put out bread, table scraps and fat drippings for the birds when we were children? Of course, we all now know that bread should never be fed to birds, and there now exists a dazzling array of seeds and feeders available to entice birds to our properties year-round.

Winter bird feeding tips

Winter bird feeding quickly illustrates the importance of feeder placement. Positioning feeders where we can see them easily from the comfort of the house is important. By placing feeders where they can be easily seen, we get more enjoyment out of watching the birds, miss less, and are more quickly aware of when feeders need attention: filling, clearing, cleaning, and protection from squirrels.

Winter temperatures, snow and ice mean we need to take certain extra measures:

- Put out high-energy foods such as suet, peanuts, black sunflower seeds, meal worms.
- Make sure feeders are filled, especially when snow or extremely cold weather is expected.
- Clear snow and ice from bird feeders and heated baths so that birds can access the food and water.

Feeding the most common winter birds

Knowing which birds are most likely to visit your area will help you adjust your food choices. For example:

- Black sunflower seeds are almost universally suitable for all types of bird feeders, attracting chickadees, nuthatches, cardinals and goldfinches. In fact, most birds love these seeds.
- Mixed seed that contains black oil sunflower seeds, cracked corn and millet in a platform feeder will attract Mourning Doves, Juncos, Northern Cardinals and Blue Jays.
- Niger seed, commonly known as thistle seed, requires a special thistle feeder. This feeder is shaped like a silo (tube) with very small holes, designed for these tiny seeds, and is available in two types: standard and inverted. The inverted silo is particularly popular with Goldfinches and Siskins, as they enjoy feeding upside down.
- Shelled peanuts in a peanut feeder or suet in a suet holder will attract woodpeckers, chickadees, and nuthatches.



Downy Woodpecker
Photos: Darlene Harvey
Northern Cardinal



Different types of feeders also encourage or discourage birds with different feeding habits. Feeders that birds can hang onto will attract “clinging” birds, such as chickadees, nuthatches, goldfinches, and woodpeckers and will not accumulate snow. Feeders with flat trays/surfaces attract “ground feeder” types of birds (cardinals, Blue Jays, Mourning Doves, juncos) and need to be covered or the snow will accumulate on them. Although Dark-eyed Juncos are occasionally seen on platform feeders offering white millet, they really prefer ground feeding. Scattering millet in the shelter of cedar hedges and evergreens attracts them, and other species of sparrows. If such protection is not available near your feeding station, temporary shelter can be provided using brush piles—a good second life for a Christmas tree!

Finally, a water feature can be an essential help for birds when larger bodies of water are frozen over, so consider investing in a heated bird bath.

By following these simple suggestions, you should attract an interesting mix of bird species to your garden. And remember, if you don't have a garden, a small bowl of water and a feeder hung from your balcony will also do the trick!



Common Redpolls
Photo: Richard Gregson

Thanks to BPQ member and past president Richard Gregson for contributing to this article.

*You can visit him at <https://1001species.substack.com/>
to read his musings about not only birds, but plants, wildlife and more.*