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Wild Things: Bird Feeding in Winter

BY MARGARET BAIRD

Bird feeding provides an easy way to get close to beautiful birds, brightens our yards in the depths of winter, and makes us feel good about helping our feathered friends during lean times. Though experts debate whether feeding by humans really makes a difference for entire wild bird populations, your seedy backyard café can certainly help the individual flyers who drop by—not to mention the persistent and often pesky squirrels, ever quick to raid those lovingly stocked feeders.

While bird feeding may seem a simple pastime, don't be fooled: Especially during the winter months, responsible bird feeding requires more than throwing the occasional handful of millet out on the lawn. Choose feeders that are easy to clean, such as those made of steel or plastic, and be sure they include drainage holes for rain. Placement is also paramount: Birds eat where they feel safe, so position feeders near areas of cover that can provide a quick escape from predators.

Keep your beaky gourmets happy by avoiding the bargain bags of seed found at grocery and hardware stores; these blends often contain filler that most birds disdain (unless they're really hungry). Rather than rake up the piles of re-

jects, you should spring for the good stuff at feed stores, where you can often buy in bulk. Most birds prefer black oil sunflower and white proso millet. Provide those two types of seed and you'll be in business, attracting the greatest variety of birds. You can also extend the menu by including thistle, suet cakes, peanuts, peanut butter, and dried fruits, which each appeal to different species—woodpeckers go ga-ga for suet, juncos love peanuts, and mockingbirds are fruit fans.

Birds will find other food sources if your feeder stocks briefly run low, particularly if you live in the 'burbs, where there's a Volvo in every garage and a feeder in every yard. But don't stop filling your feeder abruptly, as avian regulars who've learned to depend on your generosity can go hungry. If you go away for the holidays, arrange for a "feeder sitter"; he can water your plants and feed your kitties at the same time.

As for keeping squirrels away from feeders, it's hardly worth the Herculean effort it takes to outwit them; the best compromise is usually a little for the squirrels and more for the birds. If squirrels take more than their share, a squirrel-proof (but often pricey) feeder may provide relief; a whole cottage industry has sprung up to help people wage the backyard squirrel wars. But we suggest the "if you can't beat 'em, join 'em" strategy: Invest in a specialty squirrel feeder, relax, and enjoy the antics of all your wild neighbors, feathered and furred. **AS**

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