

 UI Extension Forestry Information Series

## Winter Bird Feeding

*Pam Town*

Winter bird feeding is a hobby that has taken hold almost everywhere. Over 65 million Americans feed birds, buying tons of bird food, books, feeders, and binoculars. By now, many people are filling feeders, but winter bird feeding is more than just placing out food.

If you begin to feed birds in the winter, you should continue feeding them until natural foods becomes available (sometime in April - May for the interior Northwest). Although many birds are hardy and self-sufficient, a sudden loss of expected food when coupled with heavy snow and cold temperatures could spell disaster. Attracting different bird species requires different food types, food placement, and feeder styles. In order to prevent the spread of disease and parasites, food, feeders, and surrounding areas need to be kept clean.

**Food Types.** There are many different feeds with varying palatability depending upon the bird species. Chickadees, nuthatches, grosbeaks, and finches readily consume suet and sunflower seeds. Cracked corn is relatively inexpensive and well liked by many birds, but it can spoil quickly in bad weather. Whole kernels of dried corn, on or off the cob, are resistant to spoilage. Kernels on the cob and suet do not need replenishment as often because birds cannot consume them as quickly as smaller food items. Fruits, especially apples, are a welcome dietary change. Small-sized, dry cat or dog foods will also be consumed by larger birds, such as Stellar's jay, and are nutritionally complete. Bakery products (bread, crackers, doughnuts) supply a bulky food source, but are lacking in many nutritional requirements.

No matter which food type you supply, proper care of the food, food dispenser, and surrounding area needs

to be administered. Wet weather or wet storage conditions permit growth of various molds and fungi which can be ingested or inhaled by birds. Some birds can tolerate small amounts of mold and fungal spores, while others cannot. Molds can also decrease the nutritional value of food. It is best to remove all moldy foods (including the pieces that accumulate under feeders), clean feeders, and store bulk foods in airtight containers.

Bird food is not only found in various stores, but also on fruiting shrubs and trees. The best winter food sources are those plants where the fruit remains on the plant into the winter (wild rose, hawthorn, apple trees). Ornamental flowers can also supply a valuable seed source provided the flowers are left on the plant and allowed to form seeds. Forget-me-nots, poppy, snapdragons, rose, and sunflowers are all good candidates. Junegrass, which is both native and ornamentally planted, seeds late in the season furnishing another winter food source.

**Feeder Styles.** There are many feeders available. Some bird species prefer open trays while others use perches. Placement of the feeder will also determine which bird species will utilize it. Dark-eyed juncos, mourning doves, and sparrows are ground feeders so food placed near or on the ground is most attractive. Nuthatches, chickadees, and finches are midstory feeders, so feeders elevated off the ground (hanging feeders) will be most appealing. No matter what type of feeder is used, avoid metal in areas where temperatures drop below freezing. Just as wet human skin sticks to metal in freezing temperatures, metal is a potential hazard to birds. Feathers and scales on the

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feet do protect birds, but a few cases of bird tongues and eyes frozen to metal have been documented.

Window feeders allow closer observation of birds; however, windows can be hazardous. Windows may catch the reflection of a nearby tree, the bird may be being pursued, or the bird may just be careless and fly into a window. Often the same windows are repeatedly hit. These collisions can be prevented by pulling the shade, placing something on the outside of the window that moves or glitters (wind chimes or wind socks work well), or attaching paper silhouettes of bird-hawks to the glass.

**Cleaning feeders.** As previously mentioned, feeders and the area around feeding stations need to be periodically cleaned to lessen the chance of spreading disease and parasites. Feeders should be cleaned once a month with a mild detergent combined with a solution of 1 part chlorine bleach to 10 parts water.

Rinse the feeder thoroughly with plain water and allow the feeder to completely dry before re-filling. If feeders are frequently visited, or in times of increased precipitation, weekly clean the feeder with a stiff brush in addition to monthly disinfecting. Ground feeding birds can become ill by ingesting old spoiled seed hulls or feeds tainted with droppings; therefore, clean the areas underneath the feeders. Food placed directly on the ground should be placed in well-drained areas and replaced weekly after removing any remaining food.

Taking the extra time to properly install and care for bird feeders will increase your enjoyment of bird viewing and assist the birds in surviving harsh winters.

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