

WEST VIRGINIA

# For the Birds

*Feeding birds In  
your backyard*



[www.wvdnr.gov](http://www.wvdnr.gov)



*White-breasted nuthatch in a rare horizontal pose. They are usually seen heading down a tree trunk.*

*Photo courtesy of the WV Dept. of Commerce*

Backyard bird watching is a popular winter pastime for many West Virginians. The Mountain State hosts numerous bird species in the winter, from the flashy cardinal and imposing blue jay to the cryptic brown creeper and diminutive dark-eyed junco.

Attracting many different kinds of birds to your property requires a little thought and planning. Some birds are quite shy while others will bravely take over your feeders. Feeder design and food type are important factors in enticing desired birds while discouraging pests like starlings and pigeons.

## Timing

Natural food sources used by birds vary with the seasons. In spring and summer, birds can take advantage of plentiful insects. As insects become less available with declining temperatures, many resident birds switch to diets consisting of seeds and fruit. Start your feeding efforts in late fall to match this shift. If you choose to feed birds during the warmer months, cleaning your feeder is very important to minimize the risk of disease. Feeding in warm months also increases the chances of attracting raccoons and bears to your feeders.

## Feeding Habits

Birds have adapted to living in different habitats and have developed different feeding habits and preferences. Generally, grassland and shrubland birds such as sparrows prefer to eat small grains such as millet and cracked corn off the ground. Birds associated with trees and forests such as chickadees, titmice and nuthatches tend to prefer sunflower seeds from elevated feeders. Others, such as woodpeckers and Carolina wrens, are easily attracted to fat-rich foods like suet.

## UNWELCOME VISITORS

After you've established your feeding station, you may notice that it's attracting mostly non-native flocking species that can become a nuisance because of their large numbers and aggressive nature. House sparrows, starlings, cowbirds and crows – as well as squirrels, hawks and domestic cats can become a nuisance around backyard feeders.

The feathered pests can be discouraged by feeder and seed selection. Starlings, cowbirds and crows can be too large to cling to small hanging or window-mounted feeders. Avoiding corn will keep these birds away to a certain degree. If you don't offer millet, you might reduce the frequency of house sparrow visits.

Squirrels are another matter. These aerial acrobats are hard to keep out of your feeders and can consume a mint in sunflower seeds daily. You can try suspending your feeder from a wire or mounting it on a steel pole equipped with a metal baffle to discourage these arboreal bandits. Smaller, enclosed feeders, such as the mandarin type, are harder for squirrels to use. A new feeder design, called "The Eliminator," works very well. Keeping your feeder away from trees may reduce the number of squirrel visits as well.

A fresh pile of feathers under a feeder is a devastating sight to many bird enthusiasts. Cats frequently hunt around feeders and you should be aware of their tactics. To combat them, place feeders a few yards away from dense cover where these predators can lurk. Keeping your pets indoors or on a leash is the best way to minimize bird kills around your feeders.

Occasionally, a hawk will swoop down and carry away your favorite dove or finch. Don't be alarmed by this natural behavior. Food for raptors is also scarce in the winter, and sharp-shinned and Cooper's hawks will often compensate by hunting near feeders. If you get repeated hawk attacks, try emptying your feeders until the aerial predator has moved away.

To keep away mice and rats, be sure to maintain a clean feeding area. Don't use mixes with undesirable fillers that get kicked out of feeders and accumulate on the ground.



*European starling*

*WV Dept. of Commerce*



*Black-capped chickadee*

*Photo by Susan Olcott*

## **Sanitation**

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Whenever you have a high concentration of birds in a small area, you run the risk of spreading avian diseases. If you feed birds in summer, you need to be especially mindful of disease prevention measures.

Sanitation is the key to preventing the spread of bird diseases such as histoplasmosis and house finch conjunctivitis. It is important to keep seed dry to prevent rot. Don't overstock your feeders as uneaten seed will start to grow molds after just a few warm days. To prevent the accumulation of infectious dropping piles, consider moving your feeders to new locations on a regular basis. Then rake up or mulch the soil and apply powdered limestone to the messes left behind. Be sure to change the water in baths frequently.

Clean your feeders and baths often using a solution of 1 part bleach to 9 parts water. Clean seed feeders every two weeks. Clean hummingbird feeders weekly. Non-porous surfaces such as plastic or treated wood are easier to keep clean, and you may want to choose these materials when building or selecting your feeders. If you notice an abundance of sick birds in your yard, remove your feeders for a month or more to prevent further spread of the disease. Call the DNR Wildlife Resources Section at 304-637-0245 in Elkins to report the outbreak.

# FEEDER DESIGNS

Place different types of feeders in your yard to attract a variety of bird species. A tube feeder will attract American goldfinches and pine siskins, especially if you fill it with thistle seed. Filling tube feeders with black oil sunflower seeds will attract chickadees, titmice, nuthatches and goldfinches. These feeders should be hung from a pole or a tree branch to discourage larger and more aggressive birds like European starlings



and blue jays. Platform feeders will attract sparrows, cardinals, and even evening grosbeaks in some years. Dark-eyed juncos, mourning doves and others will often eat seed that is spilled or dropped onto the ground from feeders.

You can be creative and build your own feeders. The primary function of bird feeders is to keep food clean and dry while offering easy access for the birds; otherwise their design is of little consequence to most birds. Old scraps of wood can be configured into a platform or house feeder while that extra piece of PVC pipe from your garage could be fashioned into a tube feeder. Be resourceful: even old scraps of plastic, plexiglass, milk and soda containers, and mesh onion bags can be converted into useful peanut or suet feeders. Hollow sticks and pine cones make handy suet or peanut butter feeders while maintaining a natural appearance.

*Popular house-style feeders are used by many species, but can be "taken over" by house sparrows, starlings and squirrels. Be wary of building a feeder with openings that birds can enter. They can get trapped inside.*

*Photo by Rita D. Kee*

*A cranberry colored male house finch clings to a tube feeder.*

*Photo courtesy of the WV Dept. of Commerce*

## Placement

Consider the needs of birds as well as your own viewing goals when setting up your feeding station. Feeders should be located near cover to reduce predation and situated to protect the entrances from wind and rain. If proper placement prevents you from observing the birds, try mounting a smaller feeder with suction cups to a window. Be aware that doing this might increase the risk of bird-window collisions.

Don't worry if birds do not flock to your feeders at first. If bird activity is low or absent for weeks however, you should consider a new location for your feeders.



# FOOD TYPES

## Three major food sources that satisfy most of the winter birds in West Virginia

### Sunflower Seeds

Sunflower seeds will attract the widest variety of birds. Finches, jays, cardinals, grosbeaks, chickadees, titmice, and nuthatches prefer this high-energy food source. Black oil sunflower seeds are preferable because their thin shells are easier for small birds to break open than the larger gray-striped sunflower seeds. Offering pre-shelled sunflower seeds will reduce the piles of scrapped shells that tend to accumulate beneath feeders. Be cautious with using pre-shelled seeds, however, as they also attract undesirable exotic species like the house sparrow.

### Nyjer Seed

Nyjer seed, often mislabeled as "thistle seed," is a favorite of pine siskins and goldfinches. Despite their small size, the seeds are packed with calories and nutrients which birds need and will also attract other feeder birds like chickadees and nuthatches. However, birds are much less likely to eat these seeds if they have dried out. Because of this, only purchase small amounts of seed at one time - approximately a two-week supply. This imported seed can be quite expensive.



### Suet

This high energy food source composed of animal fat is the choice of most woodpeckers and other insect-eaters - nuthatches, chickadees, wrens and kinglets. Watch out for starlings. They also relish suet but can be discouraged by using feeders that can only be accessed from beneath.

Suet is easy to make at home; simply melt down animal fat and let it cool. You can blend the melted fat with peanut butter, rolled oats or cornmeal. Place your hardened block of suet in a plastic or wire mesh hanger and mount it on a post or tree. Raw fat will also attract some bird species, but to prevent spoiling and visits from scavengers, deploy it only during cold weather.

### Other Grains

Avoid cracked corn, as it is consumed by American crows, European starlings, common grackles, brown-headed cowbirds and Canada geese. These species tend to be aggressive and out-compete other birds for food. Other fillers - milo (sorghum), hulled oats, rapeseed, canary seed and wheat - are not attractive to most birds and often end up being kicked out of feeders. These less desirable seeds are found in many commercial feed mixes because of their low cost. Consider buying your seed separately to prevent waste.

### Water

As temperatures drop below freezing, obtaining water can be increasingly difficult for many birds. You can attract additional birds to your yard by providing them with a heated bird bath and/or a source of dripping water.

### Grit

Because birds have no teeth and rely on a gizzard to break down tough seeds, they often need grit to help digest foods. If your yard lacks natural sources of grit, you might want to set out crushed eggshells, sand or fine gravel for the birds.



*Susan Olcott*

*American goldfinch in winter plumage can be attracted with nyjer seed and black oil sunflower seed.*



*Mealworms and Safflower seed*

### Specialty Foods

If you want to get fancy, provide mealworms for bluebirds, robins and wrens. Fruit - oranges, apples, berries and raisins - will attract waxwings, mockingbirds, robins and perhaps orioles when the weather begins to warm.

Another fatty delight, peanut butter (mixed with cornmeal or oats), will appeal to kinglets as well as other species that consume suet. Peanuts can be offered to attract jays, titmice and white-throated sparrows; however, these birds will readily settle for other foods. Safflower seed is relished by West Virginia's state bird, the cardinal, as well as by grosbeaks, doves and finches. It has the added advantage of being disdained by starlings, house sparrows and squirrels.

*Hummingbird feeders should be cleaned once a week. The solution should be a mix of one part sugar to four parts of boiling water to prevent growth of harmful bacteria. Having a feeder with red parts negates the need for red coloring in the water.*



*Rita D. Kee*

Species	Food Source							
	Black Oil Sunflower Seeds	Striped Sunflower Seeds	Nyjer (thistle) Seeds	Suet	Hulled Peanuts	Commercial Peanut Butter	Mealworms	Fruits, Raisins
Blue Jay	●	●			●			
Bluebird							●	●
Cardinal	●	●						
Chickadees	●	●		●		●	●	
European Starling				●	●			
Finches	●	●	●					
Goldfinch	●		●					
Grackle	●	●						
Grosbeaks	●	●						
House Sparrow	●	●						
Kinglets				●	●	●		
Mockingbird								●
Mourning Dove	●							
Nuthatches	●	●		●	●	●	●	
Pine Siskin	●		●					
Robin						●	●	●
Song Sparrow	●							
Tufted Titmouse	●	●		●	●	●	●	
Waxwing								●
White-throated Sparrow	●	●						
Woodpeckers	●	●		●	●	●	●	
Wrens				●		●	●	●
Yellow-rumped Warbler				●		●		●



Susan Olcott

*Northern cardinal brightens up many a backyard feeder, especially in winter when highlighted against a background of snow.*

## Watch Your Flock

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Now that you have implemented the basics of bird feeding, it's time to sit back and enjoy your backyard visitors. Teach your neighbors the fundamentals of bird feeding and your whole area will become a haven for wintering birds. Pick up a field guide and start recording all the species that frequent your neighborhood, and of course, don't forget to take part in the WV DNR's Winter Backyard Bird Count ([www.wvdnr.gov/wildlife/WinterBirdCount.shtm](http://www.wvdnr.gov/wildlife/WinterBirdCount.shtm).)



### **Wildlife Resources Section** Wildlife Diversity Program

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*Cover photo by Susan Olcott*

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