

What to Feed the Birds

By Celeste Silling

Spring migration is upon us now, which means that lots of hungry, weary birds will be travelling through our area. You can help these voyagers (and your local resident birds) by putting out water, native plants for them to shelter in, and of course food.

One of the most popular things to feed to the birds is seed. Many North American birds can eat seed and will gladly visit your yard if you put some out for them. But they all have their preferences! Black oil sunflower seeds are the favorite of many bird species including chickadees, grosbeaks, and cardinals. This is a large, fatty seed that gives the birds the calories they need for their travels. The striped sunflower seeds are also good, but their thick shell makes it harder for the smaller birds to open. Sunflower Hearts are another good option, but they spoil much faster in the humidity.

A favorite of goldfinches and siskins is Niger seed or thistle. You can put this in a mesh bag called a thistle stocking and the birds will cling to the sides as they eat through the mesh. If you have many of these birds visiting your yard, you can trade out the bag for a normal large feeder and mix in some sunflower hearts.

Ground-feeding birds like quails, sparrows, juncos and towhees tend to enjoy white millet along with the black oil sunflower seeds. Safflower, milo, and cracked corn are good options for plenty of birds too. If you are looking to attract a particular species, you can most likely look up which seeds they prefer.

Most cheap store-bought mixes include filler seeds like golden or red millet, flax, and buckwheat to add to the total weight of the bag. While these are technically edible, most birds don't really like them and they can spoil fairly easily. More expensive bags tend to have more nutritional and desirable seeds that don't spoil as easily. If you ever see seeds that are spoiled or growing mold, be sure to throw them out, as they are not good for the birds.

Another high-fat, high-energy snack for backyard birds like woodpeckers, orioles and nuthatches is suet. "Suet" means animal fat, but many bird-friendly suet cakes also contain ingredients like bird seed, sugar, or even peanut butter. It can be bought at the store or prepared at home (be sure to follow a bird-friendly recipe) and hung up in small cages around the yard. Suet is especially appreciated in the winter when there are fewer insects to feed on.

Some birds will never visit a seed feeder because they don't eat seeds. For these birds, you can put out some fresh fruit or jelly. Oranges, grapes, bananas and other fruits provide the sugar, hydration, and nutrients that certain birds need. Orioles, catbirds, and robins like grape jelly in particular. To attract these, put out one spoon-full of jelly in a shallow bowl or plate. Don't put more than that or bird might become too coated in it to fly.

Some birds, especially young ones, need insects more than anything. Bluebirds, vireos, thrushes, and jays for example, can be fed with mealworms. You can get freeze dried mealworms in the store and the birds love them!

Feeding the birds is a great way benefit the environment and enjoy yourself while doing so! The birds certainly appreciate it and so do we at Gulf Coast Bird Observatory. Have a great Spring Migration!