

# Feeding Our Feathered Friends in Winter

by Cindy Eusey



One of the most pleasurable activities in the winter time is feeding the birds. In addition to helping the birds through the winter, it can sharpen your observational skills, help you learn about different birds' habits and brighten your day.

## 1. What do birds want?

**Food-** Since insects and seeds are hard to come by in winter, seeds are the next best food source. Trees, grasses and wildflowers have finished their yearly seed production. Your feeder can help sustain the birds through the winter by providing additional nourishment.

**Water-** Lack of water is something birds suffer from more than lack of food. It is an effort to provide unfrozen water for them but it is very important. You can buy water heaters for your bird baths but they can run up the electric bill. It is best just to provide fresh water daily, 2-4 inches is best. Keep it at least 10 feet from the feeders in an open area to prevent seed from getting in the water. Birds can watch for predators this way.

## 2. Where to feed?

a. **The ground-** This is the simplest feeder. Just sprinkle seed on the ground. This will attract sparrows, juncos, doves, bobwhites, rabbits and squirrels.

b. **Raised feeders-** Place raised feeders on a pole at a height you can reach. Wooden platforms work well with an edge around it so the seeds don't fall off easily. Many birds including purple finch, and evening grosbeaks like platform feeders.

c. **Enclosed feeders-** These feeders should be mounted on poles. They help keep the food fairly dry and will hold several days supply.

d. **Small swinging feeders-** These feeders attract small, agile birds. Coconut shells, gourds or small commercially made feeders work well but you will have to fill them more often.

e. **Suet feeders-** Suet attracts woodpeckers, blue jays, & nuthatches. These can include a wire cage feeder, or just use an onion sack. You can also use nylon netting.

An eighteen inch square of nylon netting works well. Put the fat in the middle and tie up the top with yarn, ribbon or string and tie to a tree. You can get animal fat from the grocery meat department. You may choose to render the fat (melt it in a skillet or microwave). Pour melted fat into a container and add seeds, fruit, nuts, and cornmeal.

Locate your feeders so you can see them. Put several feeders at varying heights to accommodate the preferences of different birds. Perches are important too. Some birds like to perch before visiting the feeder and then will go back to a branch to eat. Be sure you have trees or shrubs nearby. You don't have to buy commercially made feeders. There are many plans for bird feeders on the internet which use common household items. Plan a day for the birds with the kids by concocting a mixture of seeds and creating your own feeders.

### 3. Which food to provide?

a. Sunflower Seeds are the #1 recommended feed. They are higher in oil, have softer shells than stripped sunflowers. Woodpeckers, cardinals, blue jays, goldfinch, purple and house finches, chickadee, titmice and nuthatches love sunflower seeds.

b. Niger Thistle seed is great for goldfinch and smaller birds. The tiny holes in the feeder allow the birds to pick just a seed or two at a time. If this seed sprouts in the spring, it will not make the thistles as we know them in our yards. They are supposed to be sterile when this seed is imported into this country. It is a little more expensive.

c. Peanuts are favorites of woodpeckers, jays, nuthatches, chickadee and titmice. Logs drilled with holes and filled with peanut butter and peanuts make a good feeder.

d. White millet is a cheap seed. It is good for sparrows, juncos, and mourning doves.

Use caution when purchasing mixed seeds. They contain a lot of fillers and red millet. Most birds do not like red millet. Cracked corn can attract squirrels, grackles, sparrows and others. If you don't want these types, avoid cracked corn. Buy in large quantities and store in mouse proof cans in the garage.

### 4. Does it help or hurt to feed the birds in winter?

Evidence indicates that the birds don't settle in and dine only in one place. Goldfinch will follow a circuit visiting a number of feeders and wild food patches. With many neighbors feeding the birds, they won't starve because your feeder is empty for a while. So relax.

### 5. Plant for the birds-

Almost any plant or shrub that produces berries is good for wildlife, even poison ivy! Hawthorn berries, crabapples, dogwoods service berries and viburnums can provide fruit and berries most of the winter. Flowers that are allowed to go to seed can provide additional food. Coneflowers allowed to go to seed will provide a treat for goldfinch. Don't forget the evergreens. Dense evergreens provide shelter from hawks, cats and cold wind. The conifers can provide seeds in winter and nesting sites in the spring. Deciduous trees such as oaks, chestnuts and hickory also provide nuts.

### 6. Problems-

Be sure to clean your feeders once or twice a year with a mild bleach solution. Salmonella can be transported through droppings and make the birds sick. This is especially important if you feed in the summer. Seed can be kept as long as they stay dry and no worms, moths or webs get into them. If you notice this, toss them out. Some people have a problem with squirrels at their feeders. Others enjoy watching the antics of the squirrels. It is up to you how to handle the squirrel situation.

### 7. Learn to identify birds-

Half the fun of feeding the birds in winter is figuring out which birds are visiting your feeders. Birds come in all different shapes, sizes and colors so get an identification guide and practice learning the names of your favorite visitors. Feeding the birds is a great way of helping the grays days of winter pass more quickly!

