

Birds Benefit From Feeding

Bill Grafton, *WVU Extension Service, Wildlife Specialist*

Nov. 2004

Our feathered friends look for a free lunch each winter. Bird feeders filled with seeds, fruits, and suet help millions of birds survive cold weather and deep snows. An estimated 65 million Americans enjoy feeding and watching birds.

It's important to pick the best foods and the correct feeders and to put them in the best location. Black oil sunflower seeds attract the greatest number of birds and are reasonably priced. The larger, striped sunflower seeds have thicker coats, but many birds will readily eat them. Birds prefer white millet (sometimes called Proso) over the red millet seeds. Safflower seeds are preferred by cardinals and many other birds. Safflower seeds are not readily eaten by squirrels and some of the "pesty" birds such as starlings and house sparrows.

Cracked or whole-kernel corn is a cheaper favorite food of crows, pigeons, doves, and starlings, which many bird watchers don't want at their feeders. Supplying less corn will help attract the "better" birds. Mixtures that combine sunflower seeds with millet, milo, rape, cracked corn, etc., are often wasted because birds will eat the sunflower seeds and leave most of the other seeds.



Thistle or Niger seeds in hanging stocking-type feeders are excellent for attracting goldfinches, siskins, and redpolls. The junco, sparrows, and other ground-feeding birds will readily eat corn, millet, and milo seeds.

Fresh fruit will sometimes attract robins, bluebirds, cedar waxwings, and mockingbirds, especially in late winter. Suet or peanut butter is a food prized by woodpeckers. In addition to food, birds need fresh, unfrozen water and sand or grit to stay healthy and ready for your enjoyment.

Feeders, which come in many shapes and sizes, can sit on the ground, be attached to windows and decks, or be hung from trees and wires. Each type of feeder will attract certain birds. Flat, tray-like feeders set a few inches above the ground are best for ground-feeding birds.

Hopper-type feeders have a large container to hold seeds, which slide out the bottom or to side openings as the birds eat. Many round or tubular feeders made of metal or plastic are designed to hang from trees, posts, and wires. These meet the needs of such birds as titmice, chickadees, house finches, grosbeaks, and nuthatches.

Feeders should be cleaned several times each winter to help prevent diseases that birds can contract or spread. The feeding area should also be raked clean of wasted seeds, sunflower husks, and bird droppings every two or three weeks.

Feeders should be placed at least 10 feet from places where cats or hawks can hide. Locating feeders close to (10 feet) dense evergreens or shrubs will provide "your" birds with a good chance to zip for cover if danger arrives.

Remember that birds must eat 365 days a year just like humans. They appreciate having food, water, and grit available at all times but especially when temperatures are very low and snows are very deep.