

WILDLIFE GARDENING

(2009)

WG 005

WHY SHOULD WE FEED BIRDS?

Winter is hard on small birds and many simply do not survive. Putting food out for birds in your garden can help them get through the harsh conditions of winter. Feeding birds can also provide endless hours of interest and amusement as new species may unexpectedly arrive and the regulars will perform acrobatics and establish pecking orders at the bird table.

A HEALTHY DIET

Different birds need different foods, so it is good to provide a variety of food types. Nuts are good for Tits, Siskins and Finches. Seeds are good for Finches. Fat is good for Tits. Mealworms are good for Robins. Fruit and Berries are good for Thrushes, Blackbirds, Fieldfares and Redwings. Meat scraps can be used but may attract Magpies, Crows and other scavengers which you may not want. Water is also very important for all birds. Providing a bird bath gives them a drinking source, but just as crucially, a place to wet and waterproof their feathers.

AN UNHEALTHY DIET

Foods to avoid are mouldy foods, dried foods (which can swell up inside the bird's stomach) and salted foods eg. peanuts (unless washed and oven dried). Some nuts, if old, can be poisonous to birds, so only use nuts marked "We're Safe Nuts". These are approved by the RSPB and the British Trust for Ornithology (BTO).

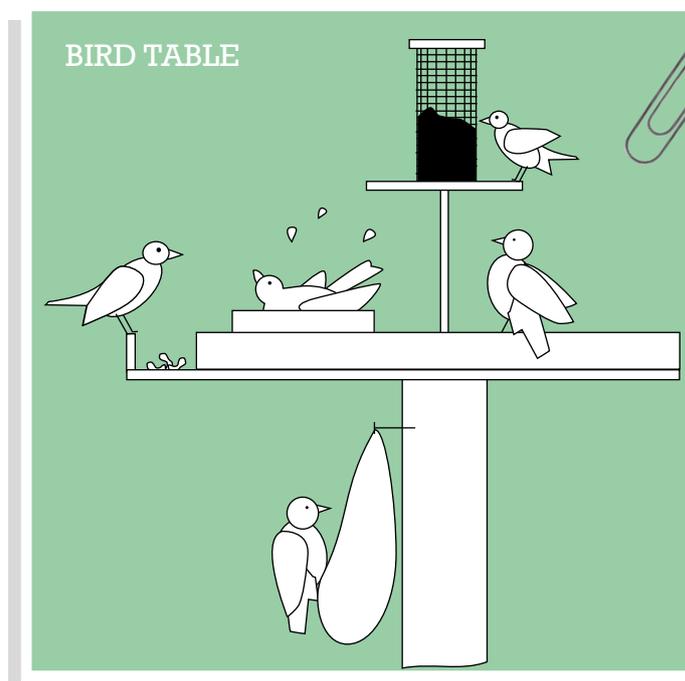
FEEDING TIMES

Once you start feeding birds, the most important thing is not to stop. Birds soon learn about and come to rely on your patch. Watch how quickly your food disappears and stock up regularly.

The RSPB and the BTO now recommend that you continue feeding all year round. Birds will always prefer their "traditional" foods caught in the wild, but food put out for them can especially help the young birds.

WHERE TO FEED BIRDS

The safest place for birds to feed in the garden is on a bird table. The siting of a bird table is crucial as it must be in the open, well away from a spot where a cat can leap and not too near the house. Bird tables can be simply made from a flat piece of wood with a rim nailed onto a post.



A couple of holes drilled into the table will keep the food dry. An upturned bucket or biscuit tin attached to the post will prevent cats from climbing up onto the table. Alternatively, birdtables are readily available in garden centres or mail order catalogues.

Some catalogues offer feeders mounted behind one way glass. They can be attached onto windows and thus offer wonderful close up viewing of the birds.

Feeders come in all shape and sizes and are readily available. Avoid buying very cheap models which may have sharp edges.



CHAFFINCH



CROWS



MAGPIE

BIRD FEEDING

Some birds however, like Dunnocks, Wrens and Pied Wagtails, still prefer to feed on the ground. If you are putting food on the ground for them, make sure you do so well away from bushes which could shelter lurking cats, but do not put the food always in the same place. This can attract mice or rats which can bring diseases that the birds could catch. Old mouldy food can also cause disease and should be regularly removed from the bird table as well as the ground feeding stations. The table should also be cleaned at regular intervals.

NORTHERN IRELAND'S TOP TEN GARDEN BIRDS

Every January the Young Ornithologist's Club does a survey of garden birds. The top ten birds in Northern Ireland in 2004 were:

1. Starling
2. House Sparrow
3. Chaffinch
4. Blue Tit
5. Blackbird
6. = Robin
6. = Greenfinch
8. Crow
9. Great Tit
10. Magpie



BLUE TIT



ROBIN

However also look out for Siskins, Long Tailed Tits, Song Thrushes, Mistle Thrushes, Blackcaps and Dunnocks. Always keep your eye out - if you put the food out, the birds will come flocking!

Our aim is to protect, conserve and promote the natural and built environment for the benefit of present and future generations.

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If you would like to get involved in this survey, contact the RSPB at Belvoir Park Forest in Belfast.

FOR FURTHER READING

- Garden for Birds** - Nigel Matthews. 1992. SGC Books.
- Birds in Your Garden** - Tony Soper and Roger Lovegrove. 1989. Webb and Bower.
- Wildlife Gardening** - Fran Hill. 1988. Derbyshire Wildlife Trust.
- The Garden Bird Book** - ed. David Glue. 1982. Macmillan.
- Feeding Garden Birds** - RSPB Leaflet.
- BBC/RSPB Videoguide to British Garden Birds.**

A BIRD TABLE MENU

- Seeds (can be bought in special wildbird seed mixes)
- Suet (smeared onto a tree or scattered on the ground)
- Bird cake (a solid mixture of suet or lard mixed in with seeds, nuts, bread crumbs, oatmeal, flaked maize, grated cheese or any other scraps)
- Dried fruit like raisins, apricots or prunes (soaked)
- Leftover cooked potatoes, rice or pasta (unsalted)
- Bones with meat (out of reach of dogs and cats)
- Rowan, Hawthorn, Whitebeam, Cotoneaster or Berberis berries (picked earlier and dried)
- Bacon rind (not too salty)
- Nuts
- Oatmeal
- Fresh coconut shells
- Over ripe fruit (chopped)
- Grated Cheese
- Moist breadcrumbs
- Mealworms

