

December 2023 Winter Bird Feeding

Welcome to NPT's BirdTown Talk, brought to you by your township BirdTown Committee! Look for a new post each month (on first Fridays) about enjoying bird life around us, and how to support it. We welcome your topical ideas, and hopefully in the future we can also include your contributions of photos to share with the community.

So here we are in December, and a good first topic is surely winter bird feeding! Our information comes from a couple expert sources: Marcy Engleman of the Audubon Society, and Ben Labovitz, owner of one of the several bird seed suppliers in our area, the WildBirds Unlimited store in Havertown. Both recently gave excellent presentations at Penn State's monthly Master Gardener lecture series at Smedley Park.

When we think of bird feeding, we generally think of hanging feeders in our yards, but it turns out that this feeding is actually 'supplemental'. Most of an adult wild bird's overall nutrition (85%) comes from natural sources, such as seeds and berries from native plants, and insects. Of course, though, with snow and ice on the ground, some of these sources are scarce or not available, and backyard feeders can help sustain a number of bird species during that time. As you may already well know, birds have feeding preferences, based on their beak shape, size of the seed and other feeding habits. Here are a few highlights. Sunflower seed is sought after by a number of backyard birds, including chickadees. (Sparrows don't seem to eat striped sunflower seeds, though). You won't find goldfinches at sunflower feeders; instead use nyger seed (commonly known as thistle), in special feeders designed for finches (keep this seed dry and fresh). Cardinals and titmice like safflower seeds, but grackles and starlings will avoid that food. Seed blends that contain milo should be avoided; it isn't nutritious for our feathered friends. For ground feeding or platform-feeding birds such as mourning doves, millet is a favorite. Cracked corn is another possibility, but it goes bad quickly and can cause birds digestive problems. Birds that eat insects, such as woodpeckers, will go for suet feeders. If you obtain your seed from the WildBird store, note that although that store does not currently offer organically grown bird seed, it is available from some on-line sources. Also, if you are using feeders, keep them closer than three feet to your house, or more than ten feet away, to help prevent birds being injured by flying into your windows.

A source of fresh water is critically important for most birds in winter. For those of you lucky enough to have cedar waxwings, it seems that they avoid feeders, but will seek out bird baths.

Backyard bird feeding does have some challenges: feeders should be cleaned at least every couple weeks (birdbaths more frequently) to minimize disease transmission. Grackle flocks and cowbirds can be unwelcome visitors. And, hawks and foxes can prey upon feeder birds. Outdoor cats do as well.

And then there are the squirrels! That's a whole other topic, for those who are intending to spend their money on feeding birds, and not on squirrels. A well-placed baffle can save some pole-mounted bird feeders from these clever, furry opportunists.

But as the snow falls and cold sets in, it can be such a joy to watch cardinals, juncos, titmice, chickadees, finches, woodpeckers, mourning doves and other wonderful birds getting nourishment at our backyard feeders! It is such a great connection with the natural world around us, for humans of all ages. Sadly, there have been serious declines in many bird species across North America during the past decades. Winter feeding can be one thing that can help some birds. In the months that follow, we'll highlight some other ways to support our community birds for those who are interested.

Good information sources provided by Marcy Engleman and Ben Labowitz:

www.johnjames.audubon.org

www.havertown.wbu.com

Male Cardinal, a common winter bird in our area:

