

Questions about Feeding Wild Birds

When is the best time to start?

Usually, whenever the weather is severe, birds will appreciate a reliable supplemental food source. In northern areas, start before the onset of cold weather so birds have time to find the feeder.

When's the best time to stop?

Although you can feed birds year-round, especially with fruit and nectar, you can stop feeding seeds once a reliable supply of insects is available in the spring.

Is it best to stop feeding hummingbirds after Labor Day?

There is no evidence that feeding hummers after Labor Day will delay migration. Still, feeders in areas with sub-freezing winter weather should be removed shortly after that holiday. Tempting hummers to remain beyond normal departure dates is ill-advised.

How long does it take for birds to find a feeder?

It may take more time for birds to find window feeders than hanging or pole-mounted feeders. You may want to wrap aluminum foil around the top of the feeder hanger. Sometimes all it takes is the reflection of light on the foil to catch their attention.

My feeder is full of seeds. I haven't seen a bird in months. Am I doing something wrong?

When birds desert your feeder, it may be simply that a lot of natural food is available nearby. Or something may be wrong, such as spoiled seeds or a contaminated feeder. Throw the seeds away and wash the feeder. Look at where your feeder is placed. Be sure it's not vulnerable to predators. At the same time, make sure it is not in an open area, away from the cover in which birds usually travel.

Will birds' feet stick to metal feeders and perches in the wet winter weather?

Birds don't have sweat glands in their feet, so they won't freeze onto metal feeders. There's no need to cover any metal feeders parts with plastic or wood to protect birds' feet, tongues or eyes.

Do wild birds need grit?

Birds have no teeth to grind their food. The dirt, sand, pebbles and grit they eat sit in their crop and help grind up their food. Adding grit to your feeder is helpful, particularly in the winter and spring. Crushed eggshells do the same thing, and in the spring have an added benefit: they provide birds with extra calcium for producing eggs of their own.

Can birds choke on peanut butter?

There is no evidence that birds can choke on peanut butter. However, birds have no salivary glands. You can make it easier on them by mixing peanut butter with lard, cornmeal or grit. Your birds will appreciate drinking water too, from a bird bath or trough.

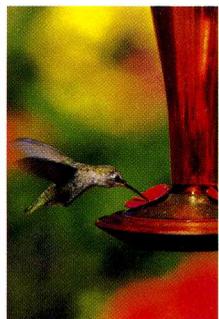
Won't suet go bad in the summer?

In the winter, raw beef fat from the local butcher is all you need for your suet feeder. When temperatures rise, raw fat can melt and get rancid. It's safer to use commercially rendered suet cakes in the spring and summer months. Rendering (boiling) the fat kills bacteria.

What is hummingbird nectar? Do hummers need nectar fortified with vitamins and minerals?

You can make your own hummingbird nectar by adding $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of sugar to a cup of boiling water. Remember, sugar water will ferment when left in the hot sun, turning nectar deadly. Do not put out a nectar feeder if you are not willing to clean it at least weekly, preferably twice a week.

Hummers eat insects for their protein. There is no evidence that these tiny birds need vitamin and mineral supplements. There is also no evidence that adding red food coloring to nectar will harm the birds, but it probably is not necessary to attract them. Just put your feeder near red flowers or buy a red hummingbird feeder.



How can I avoid bees at my hummingbird feeder?

Bees will inevitably visit your hummingbird feeder, especially in hot weather. Little plastic bee guards may help keep them from getting nectar but it won't stop them from trying. Don't take the chance of contaminating your nectar by putting vegetable oil around the feeding portals. One solution is to add a few small feeders away from where people are likely to be bothered by bees.

How close to my window can I put a feeder?

Birds will come right to your window. Sometimes it takes a while for them to overcome their initial reluctance, so be patient. Don't worry that a feeder on the window will cause birds to fly into the window. Birds fly into the window because they see the reflection of the woods. Window feeders and decals help break up the reflection.

Is cracked corn coated with a red dye safe to use?

No. The red or pink coating is capstan, a fungicide used on seeds meant for planting. If you buy a bag of cracked corn or other seed treated with capstan, return it to the store. It can kill horses, other mammals and wild birds.

I bought a bag of sunflower seeds early in the spring. Over the summer I first noticed worms, then moths. What can I do to keep the bugs out?

Moths lay their eggs in sunflower seeds. The eggs lay dormant as long as the seeds are stored in a cool dry place. In the summer, seeds get hot and the eggs hatch. The best way to avoid this problem is to buy seeds in smaller quantities, or store your seeds in a cool, dry place. It also helps to know where your retailer stores the seed. An air-conditioned storage unit is the better choice.

Insects also lay their eggs in burlap bags. Don't buy seeds in burlap bags. Don't buy seed in paper and plastic bags with patched holes. That may be a sign of insect or rodent infestation.

Birds You Can Attract to Nest Boxes

Homes for Birds

Many of the birds that visit feeders and baths may stay and nest in nearby trees. Most of them, including cardinals, doves and orioles, don't nest in boxes. You can still help them by considering their food and shelter requirements in your landscape plans.

More than two dozen North American birds nest in bird houses. The following descriptions will help you determine which birds might visit your neighborhood.

Bluebirds

If you put up a bluebird house near an old field, orchard, park, cemetery or golf course, you might have a chance of attracting a pair of bluebirds. They prefer nest boxes on a tree stump or wooden fence post between three and five feet high. Bluebirds also nest in abandoned woodpecker nest holes.

The most important measurement is the hole diameter. An inch and a half is small enough to deter starlings, which, along with house sparrows, have been known to kill bluebirds, as well as adults sitting on the nest. Bluebirds have problems with other animals too. Discourage cats, snakes, raccoons and chipmunks by mounting the house on a metal pole, or use a metal predator guard on a wood post.

American Robins

The robin is our largest thrush. They prefer to build their nest in the crotch of a tree. If you don't have an appropriate tree, you can offer a nesting platform. Pick a spot six feet or higher up on a shaded tree trunk or under the overhang of a shed or porch. Creating a "mud puddle" nearby offers further enticement, as robins use mud to hold their nests together.

Chickadees, Nuthatches and Titmice

Chickadees, titmice and nuthatches share the same food, feeders, and habitat. If you put a properly designed nest box in a wooded yard, at least one of these species might check it out.

Put chickadee houses at eye level. Hang them from limbs or secure them to tree trunks. The entrance hole should be 1 $\frac{1}{8}$ inches to attract chickadees, yet exclude house sparrows. Anchor houses for nuthatches on tree trunks five to six feet off the ground.



Brown Creepers and Prothonotary Warblers

Look for brown creepers to nest behind the curved bark of tree trunks. In heavily wooded yards, slab bark houses appeal to creepers. Prothonotary warblers also prefer slab bark houses, or bluebird boxes attached to a tree trunk, but theirs must be placed over water (lakes, rivers or swamps) with a good canopy of trees overhead.

Wrens don't seem to be very picky about where they nest. Try nest boxes with a 1 inch x 2 inch horizontal slot (1½ inch x 2½ inch for the larger Carolina wrens) instead of a circle. These are easier for the wrens to use. However, the larger the opening, the more likely it is house sparrows will occupy the box.

Wrens are known for filling a nest cavity with twigs, regardless of whether they use the nest to raise their young. Since male house wrens build several nests for the female to choose from, hang several nest boxes at eye level on partly sunlit tree limbs. Wrens are sociable and will accept nest boxes quite close to your house.



Tree and Violet-green Swallows

Tree swallows prefer nest boxes attached to dead trees. Space the boxes about seven feet apart for these white-bellied birds with iridescent blue-green backs and wings. The ideal setting for these insect-eaters is on the edge of a large field near a lake, pond or river.

Violet-green swallows nest in forested mountains of the West; boxes placed on large trees in a semi-open woodland will attract them.

Barn Swallows and Phoebes

If you have the right habitat, like an open barn or old shed, barn swallows and phoebes are easy to attract. It's their nesting behavior, not their plumage or song, that catches your attention. However, these birds tend to nest where you would rather not have them: on a ledge right over your front door. To avoid a mess by your door, offer the birds a nesting shelf nearby where you'd rather have them.



Many people want martins in their yards because, it's been said, these birds eat 2,000 mosquitoes a day. While it's true that they eat flying insects, don't expect purple martins to eliminate mosquitoes in your yard completely. Martins prefer dragonflies, which prey on mosquito larvae. If you want to help rid your yard of mosquitoes, put up a bat roosting box. One bat can eat thousands of mosquitoes a night.

Martins are entertaining creatures, however, and you'll enjoy watching their antics in your backyard. You have the best chance of attracting martins if you put a house on the edge of a pond or river, surrounded by a field or lawn. Martins need a radius of about 40 feet of unobstructed flying space around their houses. A telephone wire nearby gives them a place to perch in sociable groups.



Martins nest in groups, so you'll need a house with a minimum of four large rooms—6 or more inches on all sides, with a 2½ inch entrance hole about 1½ inches above the floor. Ventilation and drainage are critical factors in martin house design. Porches, railings, porch dividers and supplemental roof perches, like a TV antenna, make any house more appealing.

You can also make houses from gourds by fashioning an entrance hole and small holes in the bottom for drainage. If you use gourds, it's not necessary to add railings and perches. Adult martins will perch on the wire used to hang the houses. Before you select a house, think about what kind of pole you're going to put it on. Martins occupy a house ten to twenty feet off the ground. Some poles are less cumbersome than others.

Gourd houses are the easiest to set up. String them from a wire between two poles, from a sectional aluminum pole, or on pulleys mounted to a crossbar high up on a pole.

You can mount lightweight aluminum houses for martins on telescoping poles, providing easy access for maintenance and inspection. Because of their weight (more than 30 pounds), wood houses should not be mounted on telescoping poles. You'll have to use a sturdy metal or a wood pole attached to a pivot post. The problem with this lowering technique is that you can't tilt the house without damaging the nests inside. If you put your house on a shorter, fixed pole, ten to twelve feet high, you can use a ladder to inspect and maintain it.

Flycatchers

The great crested flycatcher and its western cousin, the ash-throated flycatcher, are common in wooded suburbs and rural areas with woodlots. Their natural nesting sites are abandoned woodpecker holes. Flycatchers may nest in a bird house if it is placed about ten feet up in a tree in an orchard or at the edge of a field or stream. This is a longshot, but well worth the effort if you are successful.

Woodpeckers

You can attract all types of woodpeckers with a suet feeder, but only the flicker is likely to use a bird house. They prefer a box with roughened interior and a floor covered with a two-inch layer of wood chips or coarse sawdust. Flickers are especially attracted to nest boxes filled with sawdust, which they "excavate" to suit themselves. For best results, place the box high up on a tree trunk, exposed to direct sunlight.

Try building a birdhouse for the other species of woodpeckers following the guidelines in this booklet. You might be surprised!

Owls

Most owls seldom build their own nests. Great horned and long-eared owls prefer abandoned crow and hawk nests. Other owls (barred, barn, saw-whet, boreal and screech) nest in tree cavities and bird houses.

Barn owls are best known for selecting nesting sites near farms. Where trees are sparse, these birds will nest in church steeples, silos and barns. If you live near a farm or a golf course, try fastening a nest box for owls about 15 feet up on a tree trunk.

Screech owls prefer abandoned woodpecker holes at the edge of a field or neglected orchard. They will readily take to boxes lined with an inch or two of wood shavings. If you clean the box out in late spring after the young owls have fledged, you may attract a second tenant—a kestrel. Trees isolated from larger tracts of woods have less chance of squirrels taking over the box.

