

MESSENGER-INQUIRER



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Watching birds through the window brings enjoyment to a dreary winter day. Some people feed birds all year, and others only during the colder months when food is scarce. Dr. Matt Springer, assistant extension professor of wildlife management, at the University of Kentucky Department of Forestry and Natural Resources, provides information about feeding birds in the winter.

When feeding birds, the type of food and feeder style determines the kinds of birds and wildlife that will be attracted. Consider whether you want to discourage or encourage squirrels from visiting the feeder.

Since different birds prefer specific foods, providing a variety of seeds attracts a diversity of birds. Many bird species, including cardinals, blue jays, chickadees, finches, nuthatches, and sparrows consider black oil sunflower seed their favorite. This is a good starter food, is inexpensive, and is available from grocery stores to feeder supply outlets.

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Safflower discourages squirrels from ransacking the feeders. Squirrels will not eat safflower, however, cardinals, mourning doves, woodpeckers, blue jays, tufted titmice, finches, and chickadees love it. Safflower seeds are high in fat, fiber, and protein. While more expensive than sunflower seed, money is saved because the squirrels will not gobble it up.

Goldfinches prefer thistle or nyjer seed. Because these seeds are so small, a special finch feeder is required that usually has clear tubes with small holes and perches. Some finch feeders have perches above the holes, deterring other small birds from eating the seed. Watching finches use their unique ability to hang upside down and feed is fun.

A source of protein is suet, typically made of animal fat. It is hung in cages and attracts many birds, especially woodpeckers.

Seed mixes found where birdseed is commonly sold are least expensive and attract many birds. However, birds can make quite a mess as they scatter the seed looking for their preferred type.

Birds also love other types of food such as pieces of apples and oranges, peanuts, peanut butter, and cracked corn. Avoid these foods if you don't want to attract squirrels.

With many styles of feeders available, the birds you want to attract determine the selection. House or hopper feeders have walls, a platform, and a roof to keep the rain out. These are all-purpose feeders. Platform or tray feeders are good for ground-feeding birds, such as grosbeaks, cardinals, and mourning doves, allowing for an opportunity to lay out a buffet of fruit and nuts. Squirrels easily feed from tray feeders, but if safflower seeds are used, they will not bother the feeder.

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Squirrel-proof feeders are widely available, but keep in mind that squirrels are smart creatures according to Dr. Springer. They can usually think their way around most obstacles we humans set for them.

More birds are attracted by using more than one feeder placed in different areas of the yard. Position feeders near a tree or shrub, so birds have cover in the event a predator appears. It is not recommended to feed birds if outdoor or feral cats are in the area. Cats are a major driver in the decline of songbirds and will kill upwards of a billion birds a year.

Clean feeders once a month. Mold and bacterial growth, which can infect birds and spread disease among neighborhood flocks, are promoted in dirty feeders. Goldfinches are particular when it comes to a clean feeder. They avoid the thistle feeder once it becomes damp and moldy inside. A dirty feeder's foul smell attracts unwelcomed wildlife such as insects, mice, or rats. Clean the feeder with a solution of one-part bleach to nine-parts hot water. Another method of cleaning is using a mild solution of unscented dish soap.

Once you've started, it's best to continue feeding throughout winter. Birds need more calories to sustain them through the cold winter nights, and depend on the feeder.

To save money on bird food, watch for sales. Buying in bulk is another way to save money. The key is to store it all in a cool, dry place.

For more information about attracting birds to your yard, contact the Daviess County Cooperative Extension Service Office at 270-685-8480 or annette.heisdorffer@uky.edu.

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Annette's Tip:

Feeders are available that adhere to your windows or balcony if you live in an apartment or townhouse.

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