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FEEDING SONGBIRDS 101

As long as you provide for birds' three basic needs - food, water, and cover - you can expect a variety of winter visitors in your backyard. Bird feeders, bird houses, water, and plant materials can help meet birds' habitat needs.

Choose seeds that attract birds that interest you. Overall, birds prefer small black oil-type sunflower seeds. Some finely cracked corn is nearly always good in a mix. White proso is also a top choice to attract small birds. Safflower seeds attract cardinals, chickadees, house and purple finches, nuthatches, and mourning doves. Safflower seeds are less attractive to squirrels, grackles, European starlings and house sparrows, species that are sometimes a nuisance at feeders. A few unsalted peanuts will appeal to many birds, including woodpeckers, blue jays, cardinals, nuthatches, and chickadees.

Birds prefer high-quality, relatively fresh seeds. Commercially-packaged seed mixes are convenient but such mixtures often contain too much filler. Instead, buy preferred seeds in bulk and mix your own, or try fresh specialty mixes from sources that specialize in bird feeding products. This combination is attractive to a wide range of desirable backyard songbirds:

- * 50 percent sunflower seeds (small, black-oil type)
- * 35 percent white proso millet
- * 15 percent finely cracked corn

Many other combinations also work well. Some experienced bird feeders recommend that at least 75 percent of the seed offered should be black oil-type sunflower. Try experimenting by offering a few seed types or mixes in different areas of your yard.

Suet is a great winter energy source, especially attractive to insect-eaters such as woodpeckers, chickadees, and nuthatches. Commercial no-melt suet preparations can be used year-round. Typical suet is the hard, white fat from around the beef kidney area, often available from butcher counters. Suet can be fed as it comes from the butcher or melted and mixed with other foods to form suet cakes. Suet is sometimes supplemented with a protein source such as canned dog food, dehydrated eggs, or peanut butter. These can be placed out directly for feeding.

Suet can be fed in a net onion or orange sack or in a suet feeder. Hang suet feeders on or near a tree, on a wooden post, or perhaps from your seed feeder. It is best to keep suet in shade so that it doesn't melt.

For more tips and details, consult the University of Nebraska publication NebGuide G83-669-A, "Backyard Wildlife: Feeding Birds," available from the University of Nebraska Cooperative Extension in Saline County, phone 821-2151, or online at <http://www.ianr.unl.edu/pubs/wildlife/g669.htm>



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