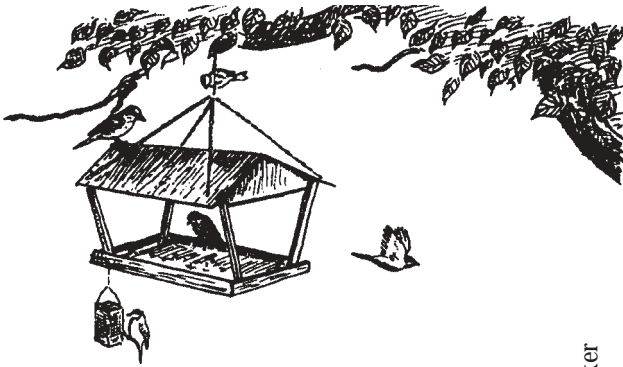


Garden BirdWatch

Feeding Garden Birds



Jeff Baker

Why provide food for wild birds?

Providing food and water in our gardens helps millions of small birds through winters which they might not otherwise survive, especially now that natural sources of food such as stubble fields and hedgerows are scarcer than ever. The Song Thrush population has declined by over 50% in the last 25 years and that of Blackbird, Starling and Dunnock by over 25%. Feeding these birds may well help to compensate for whatever is causing these losses. By continuing to provide food throughout spring and early summer, often the most stressful time for seed-eating birds such as finches, we can give them a good start to a successful breeding season. In addition, providing a variety of foods will attract the birds to a table or other feeding station where they can be more easily observed and logged for the Garden BirdWatch survey.

The birds seen will depend on the foods presented, the location of your garden and the weather. Sometimes when snow arrives, the number of birds recorded declines. This is partly due to weaker birds dying, but also because everyone in the neighbourhood has thrown out crusts and the birds are spoiled for choice. When the snow melts, it's often assumed that the birds are out of danger, but in fact they will once more depend on those gardens in which food is always present. Once you start putting out food, don't stop! To help birds the most, feed moderate amounts every day, with water. Do not allow food to accumulate, especially in warm and wet weather, as damp bird food is an ideal breeding ground for infectious disease organisms such as *Salmonella*, especially if fouled with droppings. Only put out as much as is consumed within a day or two.

Are any foods bad for birds?

Almost anything edible will interest birds (although highly-flavoured or processed foods will only be taken in emergency) but some items are definitely harmful.

Do not put out any of the following:

Salty items such as salted peanuts, salted bacon, crisps and snacks. Don't put salt in the bird bath either!

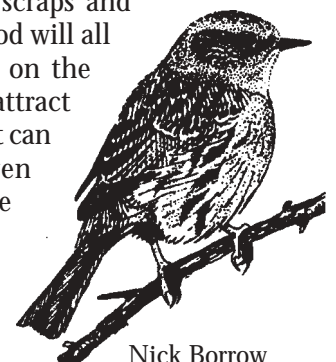
Anything that could choke a bird. Whole peanuts must not be presented in the breeding season except in a mesh feeder, as they could choke nestlings. Bacon rinds must always be chopped into small pieces.

Dry foods which swell in birds' stomachs. Desiccated coconut can be fatal to birds if not well-soaked.

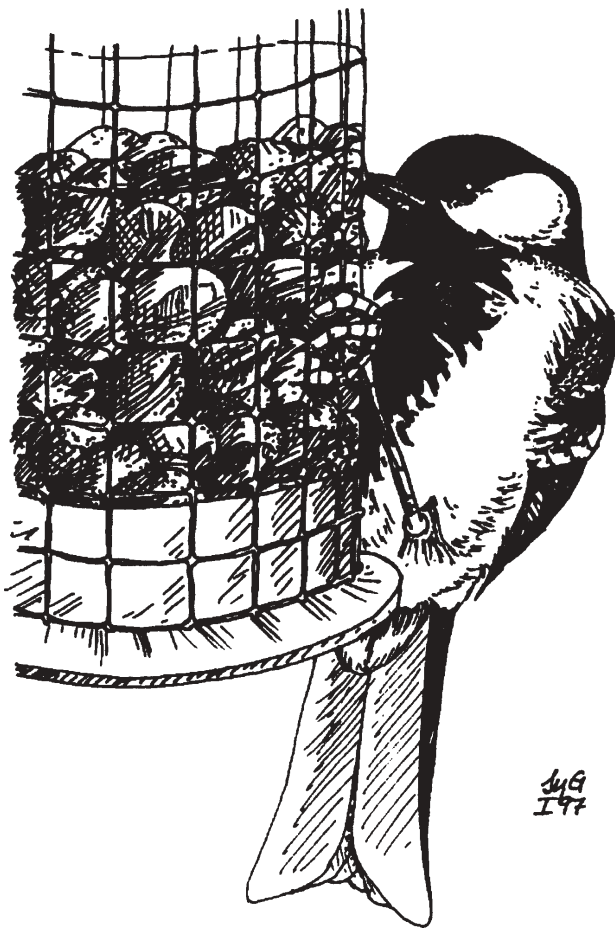
Spoiled or mouldy food. Moulds produce toxins that are very poisonous to birds. Peanuts should only be purchased from a supplier that has their stock regularly tested in this country for dangerous levels of aflatoxin. Nuts safe for humans may not be safe for birds!

What kind of food is good for birds?

Special food mixtures for wild birds are widely available from shops or by mail order, which is more convenient for larger quantities. A mix containing wheat will attract pigeons and doves, if you wish to feed only smaller birds choose a mixture without wheat. Black sunflower seeds are a favourite with tits, finches and other small birds. The shells of the black variety are thinner than those of the traditional striped kind, small birds find them easier to open. Fat is popular in winter, ready-made fat bars can be bought or they can be made at home from scraps, seeds, chopped peanuts and suet. Bread, cake, cooked pastry, leftover meat scraps and even dried bits of dog or cat food will all be taken. Do not leave them on the ground overnight, they may attract rats. Raw or partly-cooked meat can carry infections (possibly even Foot and Mouth Disease if the meat is imported) which could be spread by birds.



Nick Borrow



Su Gough

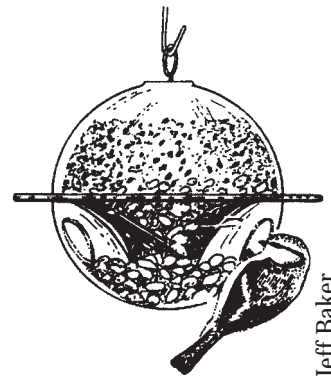
Fruit such as windfall apples strewn on the ground or patio table will attract thrushes, as will raisins or other dried fruit. Soak these in water first if they are very dry. Crumbled or grated cheese scattered on the ground and especially around the edge of shrubs is good for Dunnocks and Robins. Pinhead oatmeal can attract small birds such as Wrens but should not be left out in wet weather. Fat smeared into cracks in tree bark will be found by Treecreepers, Nuthatches and woodpeckers but the ultimate gourmet garden bird items are the live foods such as mealworms or waxworms. These can be bought from pet shops or by mail order.

Water

Water is essential for bathing as well as drinking. Birds will come to depend on your bird bath during freezing weather as well as in summer. Try to keep the water reasonably clean and never add salt or antifreeze. If you cannot manage to keep the bath topped up from a hot kettle, try using a nightlight under a metal dustbin lid raised on bricks. Birdbaths should be shallow with rough sides so birds can climb out. If your container has smooth steep sides, place a rock in the middle so birds can perch and avoid falling into deep water.

Hygiene

Birds are susceptible to bacterial infection such as *Salmonella* so tables and feeding stations should be moved regularly around the garden to prevent accumulation of droppings. Sick birds in your garden,



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have probably acquired the infection elsewhere but they could transmit it to other healthy birds at your feeding station. Clean wooden tables by scrubbing with clean water; plastic or metal feeders can be disinfected with weak bleach as long as all traces are rinsed off. Always wash your hands after handling bird feeding equipment. It is important not to let uneaten food accumulate; only put out as much as is consumed in a day or two. Mouldy or spoiled food should be discarded.

Predators

Natural predators are part of the birds' own ecosystem, there is little that can be done to deter them. Sparrowhawks rely entirely on small birds for their own survival and hence maintain a natural population balance with their prey, in contrast to domestic cats which destroy garden birds unnecessarily and are 'subsidised'. Try not to feed your birds in any way that makes them more vulnerable. A dog is one of the best cat repellents! It may be possible to train your own cat not to catch birds, or fit it with a bell, hopefully it should keep other cats out of your garden. Food on the ground should be well away from any cover in which a cat can lurk. Harmless electronic cat scarers can now be purchased.

For more information ...

We hope you will want to join the BTO/CJ Garden BirdWatch survey. Anybody with a garden can join, special expertise is not required. Participants note the common birds in their garden weekly and make a small contribution to the costs of the survey. Upon joining you will receive our own informative quarterly magazine *Bird Table*, special forms to record birds and a full-colour garden bird handbook. CJ Wildbird Foods' will send you their informative Garden Bird Feeding Handbook with special discount vouchers.

To join, send a cheque for £12.00 (payable to BTO) to: **Garden BirdWatch, BTO, FREEPOST, Thetford, IP24 2BR**. If you can spare a stamp it will save BTO research funds. Credit card holders can telephone 01842 750050. The BTO is registered charity 216652. More details are on the Internet at www.bto.org