

Birdlife in your Garden

In my last article, I explored some of the things you might do to enhance the attractiveness of your garden for birds in winter. This time, we will explore what foods are best to offer them during this coldest part of the year.

Winter is a difficult time for garden birds. They need to store energy (in the form of fat) to keep warm, especially small species which may only be able to lay down enough reserves for one night. Nights are long and the time available to feed during the short days is limited. In addition, the ground may be frozen or snow-covered, preventing access to what invertebrates and seeds may be still available, and deciduous trees are bare, offering little protection when nighttime shelter is needed.

If possible, provide a number of feeders of different types in several quiet areas of your garden, close to trees. (If this is not possible, however, one feeder is infinitely better than none!) The wider the selection of foods you make available, the greater the range of birds you will attract. Here are some suggestions:

Put out foods rich in saturated fat, such as suet in its various forms and unsalted bacon rinds. Supplement this with dried fruit, sunflower hearts, peanuts, grated mild cheese, soft fruit, porridge oats and unsalted nuts. Some types of dinner scraps are excellent, such as fragments of mince-pies and fruitcake.

You can also provide mealworms, soft fruit, seeds and grain, cooked rice, cooked pasta, the inside of cooked potato and pastry.

High energy food bars and fat can be rubbed onto rough tree bark for Treecreepers, Goldcrests and tits.

Apples and pears will attract thrush species and can simply be left on the ground.

Provide just enough food so that it is all consumed within a few days and does not have time to become mouldy.

However, there are some things to avoid:

Do not put out leftovers that are low in energy content (e.g. stale bread) or difficult for birds to eat.

Do not provide soft fats (e.g. the fat from your Christmas turkey) as these can contaminate feathers and destroy their insulating properties.



Small birds, like these Long-tailed Tits, have few energy reserves to offset the chilling effects of cold and windy weather and require a plentiful and continuous supply of fat-rich food like peanuts (Photo: John Harding, BTO Library).

Avoid offering food with lots of wheat or millet unless you wish to be overwhelmed by Woodpigeons!

Salted or highly spiced foods should not be made available at your feeding station: nor should desiccated coconut.

Always keep your feeders clean throughout the winter to prevent the spread of infections: birds' immune systems are often weaker during the cold weather, making them more susceptible to disease.



A Great Tit feasts on suet. This energy-rich food is available in a variety of forms including pellets, slabs, balls and, like here, as a suspended block (Photo: John Harding, BTO Library)

Feeders will be much in demand early in the morning after frigid or windy nights as birds attempt to replenish their energy reserves. Fill them before dawn if you are an early riser or last thing at night if you are not! Also make sure food is available late in the afternoon when birds are stocking up for the long night ahead.

Also remember that birds need water, both for drinking and for bathing (to maintain the flightworthiness of their plumage). Wildlife ponds tend to remain unfrozen longer but bird-baths take up less space and require less effort. An old tennis or ping-pong ball floating in the water will help to keep it ice-free during cold weather. Do not use antifreeze, salt or sugar to prevent freezing.

Providing a plentiful supply of fresh, energy-rich foodstuffs can go a long way towards offsetting winter mortality in birds. During cold snaps, you will notice more birds coming into your garden to seek sanctuary from the harsh environment of the wider countryside. The variety of species may increase too and you may be lucky enough to attract unusual visitors such as Blackcaps and Bramblings.

I wish you all a joyous holiday season and a garden bird-filled New Year!

John Arnfield

The author is British Trust for Ornithology Ambassador for the Garden BirdWatch (GBW) scheme in southern Shropshire and is available to speak to local organisations on GBW, as well as answering questions on garden birds and feeding. If you would like free leaflets on gardens and birds, please contact John on (01694) 724 170 or at arnfield.2@osu.edu.