

Bird Feeding Do's and Don't's

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Dear Bird Feeder,

Bird feeding provides enjoyment to millions of North Americans each year. When proper feeding methods are followed, both humans and birds derive benefits from feeders. However, recent research on the impact of bird feeding has shown that feeders can sometimes be a source of disease for the birds visiting them. There is good news, too: With minimal effort, any feeder operator in North America can provide a safe, healthy feeding station for birds. The following information, compiled by the editors at Bird Watcher's Digest, offers useful tips and techniques for maximizing your bird-feeding enjoyment.

Tips for a Healthy Feeding Station

- Give your seed feeders (especially thistle and tube feeders) a shake before you refill them, to dislodge any compacted seed. Dump out any wet clumps of old seed.
- Clean all hulls off platform feeders and out of seed trays daily.
- Keep some old spatulas and brushes handy by the feeding station for cleaning purposes.
- Disinfect feeders by scrubbing with a weak bleach solution (1/4-cup bleach to 2 gallons warm water) every few weeks, more often in summer or rainy periods. Rinse and allow feeders to dry before refilling.
- Wash your hands thoroughly after filling or cleaning your feeders.
- Move your feeding station when the ground beneath it becomes covered with seed hulls and droppings. Rake the old site to remove hulls and to give the grass a chance to recover.
- Store your seed in a clean, dry, airtight container, such as a metal or plastic garbage can.
- Don't allow large amounts of seed to become wet, as on platform feeders. Instead, when it's wet outside, feed primarily from covered feeders that will keep seed dry, or put out only a handful of seed at a time on platforms.
- Don't put hulled sunflower hearts (chips) out where wet weather can cause them to spoil. Offer them in a tube or hopper feeder.
- Don't put out any more seed than can be eaten by the birds by nightfall, especially where raccoons, opossums, bears, deer, or rodents are a problem.

- If you see a sick or dead bird at your feeders, halt your feeding for a few weeks to allow the healthy birds to disperse. This lessens the possibility of disease transmission. Remove and discard in the trash any dead birds. Report the sick birds to your local wildlife officials, many of whom monitor wildlife health.
- If you provide suet, reduce the amount you offer in hot weather. Use rendered suet or heat-resilient suet blocks that are available commercially. Heat can make suet, purchased from a butcher, rancid and unhealthy for birds. Runny suet can also stick to birds' feathers, making them hard to keep clean and useful.
- Reduce window-kills of birds by placing feeders a safe distance away. If birds regularly strike a particular window place a screen, crop netting, or a series of branches over or in front of the outside glass panel to break up the reflection.
- Though birds may not be entirely dependent on your feeder, it's best not to leave them totally without food if you plan to be away from home in mid-winter. Purchase an oversized feeder with a large seed capacity, or ask a willing neighbor to continue feeding your birds.
- Don't discontinue feeding as soon as the grass greens and the weather warms in spring. Many birds will continue coming to your feeders all summer long.

Tips for Better Feeding

- Black-oil sunflower seed is the most widely used birdseed, popular with the greatest number of bird species. Its thin shell and large nutmeat are ideal for most feeder species.
- Offer a variety of seed and food in a variety of appropriate feeders (sunflower seed in tube, hopper, or platform feeders, nyjer (thistle) in tube feeders, peanuts in peanut feeders, suet in suet cages, and mixed seed on platform feeders or scattered on dry ground).
- Offer the thick-shelled gray-striped sunflower seed to cardinals, jays, chickadees, titmice and nuthatches.
- Offer safflower seed to cardinals. Squirrels and blackbirds in many parts of the continent do not like it.
- If your feeder is overrun with blackbirds, pigeons, or house sparrows, stop offering mixed seed on the ground or on platform feeders. Feed only black oil sunflower seed in tube or hopper feeders until the problem species disperse.
- Don't offer so-called wild bird mixes in tube feeders. These are better fed on platforms or out of hopper feeders. Birds, which prefer sunflower seed, will just empty the feeder to get at the sunflower seeds.
- Make a brush pile near you feeder to make sparrows, towhees, and other shy birds feel more at home, but be sure it won't harbor roaming cats.
- Add natural features to your feeding station, such as branches to perch on, to make birds feel more at ease.

Hummingbird Feeding Tips

- Don't use hummingbird feeders that are difficult to clean, or have many small parts.
- Do wash your hummingbird feeders thoroughly with hot, soapy water, and rinse completely, every time you refill them.
- Don't allow molds or yeasts to grow in your hummingbird feeders. When these appear, empty and scrub feeders immediately.
- When making hummingbird nectar, blend water and white table sugar in a 4 to 1 ratio (4 parts water or 1 part sugar). Add the sugar to boiling water. Bring the mixture to a boil again while stirring to dissolve sugar, then let cool.
- Don't use insecticides, such as wasp killers, anywhere near bird feeders, especially hummingbird feeders.
- Don't use anything but white, granulated table sugar. No powdered or brown sugar, honey, molasses, red food coloring, artificial sweeteners or nutrients should be used.

Tips for a Healthy Birdbath

- Don't situate birdbaths under feeders or perches, where droppings can fall into them.
- Rinse and scrub birdbaths daily in summer, or whenever they become fouled with bird droppings. Once a month, scrub out with a light bleach solution (1/4-cup bleach in 2 gallons water), rinse thoroughly and refill.