



Wild About Birds

Winter 2006

# BirdChat

Birdfeeding Supplies, Garden Décor, and Gifts  
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## Turning Your Backyard into Wild Bird Habitat: What the Birds Tell Us About Our Environment

**B**ird watching is the fastest growing hobby in North America; it has created an increased sensitivity to the roll of the environment in the well being of our wild birds. Feeding the backyard birds helps us see the connection between healthy bird habitat and the overall health of the ecosystem.

Every time we destroy natural habitat to build houses and shopping malls, wild birds lose their homes. If each of us made the effort to turn our backyard into wild bird habitat, we could make a difference. It's important for us to invite birds into our backyard; provide them with food, water, cover from predators, and places to raise young. Birds are a vital component of our environment: they eat fruit and disperse their seeds, they pollinate



flowers, and they control insects. Improving habitat for birds improves the general condition of the environment, which will contribute to an increase in overall diversity.

The diversity of the bird population is an indicator of the overall health of the ecosystem and can reflect habitat loss. Studies have concluded that a lack of songbirds is often a sign that the area is in poor ecological condition. For instance, in a city area with few trees or in a house-dense suburb, you are likely to

see only robins, sparrows, crows, and starlings. Well-treed suburbs and rural areas will also attract goldfinches, catbirds, titmice, and blackbirds. Unspoiled, forested land will support warblers, woodpeckers, and tanagers.

What are the birds telling you about the condition of your neighborhood's ecosystem? Get together with your neighbors and invite wild birds into your yards. You can make a difference in the health of our planet's environment – one yard at a time! ♫

*Wild About Birds* is owned and operated in Milford, Ohio by Peggie Flierl. *BirdChat* is a periodic newsletter written by Ms. Flierl for customers of *Wild About Birds*. Material appearing in *BirdChat* may not be reprinted without permission. Any comments should be directed to Ms. Flierl at:

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## Species Specifics: Northern Cardinal

*"Their favorite seeds are sunflower and safflower."*

The cardinal is our state bird (and the official bird of 6 other states, too!) and is usually the first bird to appear at your feeders in the morning and the last one to leave at night.

Cardinals are about 8" long with a wingspan of about 11". They weigh 2-3 ounces. They are the only all red, crested birds. Their average life span is only 1 year, although they can live for more than a decade, and a 2-3 year old cardinal would be the exception rather than the rule.

If it seems that the population of cardinals is increasing it's because their range has been moving northwards during the past century. They were once considered a southern bird and in the early 1800s were rarely seen north of the Ohio River. By 1910, though, cardinals were found nesting in southern Canada. They are year round residents throughout their range east of the Rockies.

Cardinals prefer to eat on a tray, a platform type feeder or on the ground. Their favorite seeds are sunflower and safflower. In the fall and winter, car-

dinals feed in flocks. In the spring and summer they feed in pairs and it is not uncommon to see males chase other males out of their territory. Unlike most birds, both male and female cardinals sing. They have a repertoire of over 25 songs and belt them out from the tops of trees in early spring.

Cardinals are monogamous. You'll know that their breeding season has begun when you see the male passing a seed to the female. This activity is called courtship or mate feeding and it is thought to strengthen the pair bond. The female, sometimes with the males help, builds a loose nest of twigs, leaves, bark and grasses in a small tree, dense shrub or thicket. She will lay 3-4 whitish eggs blotched

with brown or purple. The female alone will incubate the eggs for 12-13 days. The male and female both tend to the nestlings for about 10 days. After they fledge, the juveniles are cared for mostly by the male for about 3 weeks while the female starts another brood; cardinals will raise 2-3 broods each breeding season.



## All About Birdseed Mixes

Although they may look similar, not all birdseed mixes are the same. Many people are drawn to the various inexpensive mixes that carry fancy names like Premium, Superior, or Gourmet, available at discount super stores, grocery stores, and feed stores. After reading this article, though, I think you'll agree, that cheap birdseed mixes are usually not an economical choice.

Mixed seed purchased at discount and grocery stores is inexpensive because it is usually stretched with filler seed—buckwheat, rice, oats, milo, flax, rape seed, and canary seed. These seeds are less appealing to wild birds and uneaten seed will build up under your feeders to spoil or sprout into weeds.

Okay, so what should be in a wild bird seed mix? Black oil sunflower should always be the main ingredient as all birds, big and small, can crack open this small, thin shelled sunflower seed. Our exclusive Songbird Mix contains black oil sunflower seed, white millet, striped sunflower seed, safflower and peanut pieces. These are the ingredients you should look for in any quality seed mix. Don't forget, most other ingredients are filler and will end up, uneaten, under your

feeders.

Our No Mess/Patio Mix contains hulled sunflower seed, hulled millet and peanut pieces; no messy shells under your feeder and no sprouting. We also carry Cardinal Mix—half black oil sunflower, half safflower seed. Cardinals love this mix and so do chickadees, titmice, nuthatches, doves and finches!

Mixed seeds like Songbird Mix and No Mess/Patio Mix work best in hopper or tray type feeders. Most of the birds that visit these feeders—cardinals, chickadees, titmice, nuthatches, finches, woodpeckers—are picking their favorite seeds (sunflower seeds, safflower seeds, peanuts) from the mix you've offered them and are knocking the millet out of the

feeder to be consumed by the ground feeders (doves, sparrows, towhees). Cardinal Mix performs well in either a hopper feeder or tube feeder.

When you are shopping for mixed bird seed, spend a little more and get a quality mix, like Songbird Mix, No Mess/Patio Mix or Cardinal Mix, that the birds will like and will create less mess and weeds for you. It's a much more economical choice!



*"...spend a little more and get a quality mix..."*



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## Get Ready for the Great Backyard Bird Count!



The Great Backyard Bird Count (GBBC) returns for its ninth season February 17-20, 2006. Everyone can participate, from beginning bird watchers to seasoned experts. During the count, bird watchers tally up birds for as little as 15 minutes, or for as long as they like, keeping track of the highest number of each bird species they see together at one time. People are encouraged to report birds from public lands and local parks, as well as from their backyards. Participants enter their numbers at [www.birdsource.org/gbbc](http://www.birdsource.org/gbbc) and can explore sightings maps, lists, and charts as the count progresses. For nearly a decade, the GBBC has kept tabs on the ever-changing patterns of birds in winter. In 2005, participants sent in more than 52,000 checklists, with a record breaking 613 species and more than 6 million birds counted. There is no fee or registration for this event. For more information, contact the Cornell Lab of Ornithology at [cornellbirds@cornell.edu](mailto:cornellbirds@cornell.edu) or (800) 843-2473.

## Dear BirdGal

*Dear BirdGal, I enjoy feeding my backyard birds but I'm worried that they'll become dependent on me. I usually go to Florida for a few weeks each winter. Will they starve to death while I'm gone? Concerned*

Dear Concerned, Studies have been conducted indicating that birdfeeder availability during the winter in the colder, northern states probably improves the survival rate of chickadees, but overall, birdfeeding does not affect birds' survivability. Because birds have wings, they instinctively forage for food visiting many locations during the day searching for different sources. Birds never become dependent on one source and most studies have shown that birds with easy access to feeders only use them for 20% of their daily rations. If your feeders are empty or you stop feeding, they will seek out other sources. Birds are creatures of habit and remember where they have found food in the past. BG



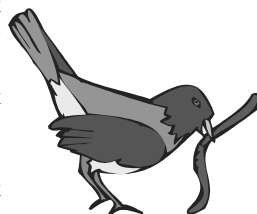
## Mealworms...the Other Bird Food

**M**ealworms? Eeeeeoooo! Now, don't get squeamish, these are smooth, hard-skinned worms that are not slimy and, besides, insect eating birds love them!

Actually, mealworms are the larvae of the darkling beetle (*Tenebrio molitor*). To prevent the larvae from pupating and becoming beetles, keep mealworms in the refrigerator or in an unheated garage or basement as long as the temperature is between 40° and 50°. Store them in a smooth-sided, covered, ventilated container with wheat bran, oats or cornmeal. Mealworms are available at *Wild About Birds* in 100 and 500 count ventilated containers ready for your refrigerator (\$1.99, \$6.99) and in a cloth sack for you to package (1,000 for \$9.99). If you want larger quantities (5,000 or 10,000), shipped directly to your home, call Nature's Way 513-738-7222.

Mealworms can be offered to backyard birds, year round, as long as the temperature is above the

freezing mark, 32°. Place them in a small smooth-sided container (catfood can, tuna can, margarine tub, etc) inside a bluebird feeder (\$26.99) or thumbtack your small container directly to a deck rail, fence post or bluebird box. Droll Yankee makes a plastic, dish-style feeder with a dome (X-1 Seed Saver, \$25.99) that is ideal for feeding mealworms to the birds.



Most customers think mealworms are just for bluebird feeding. Not so! Most insect eating birds will be attracted to your mealworm feeder—mockingbirds, robins, brown thrashers, chickadees, titmice, woodpeckers. Everyday, several Carolina wrens visit the mealworm feeder I have on my deck rail.

So, although we traditionally think about feeding mealworms only to nesting bluebirds, why not treat the insect eating birds in your backyard this winter with an offering of mealworms, a new and different bird food!

*"Most insect eating birds will be attracted to your mealworm feeder..."*



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☒ Things to do!

- ✓ Brush off feeders after a snowstorm and sweep an area clean under the feeders for ground feeding birds—towhees, sparrows, juncos, doves.
- ✓ If you plan to make nesting boxes in your own woodshop this winter, do some research and use the correct box dimensions and hole size for the birds you're trying to attract. Do not put a perch on the front; it is not necessary and eliminating it will discourage house sparrows.
- ✓ Put suet out for insect loving birds—woodpeckers, titmice, nuthatches, chickadees, and winter visitors like yellow-bellied sapsuckers.
- ✓ Put out chopped up fruit for mockingbirds, robins, blue

birds, and cedar waxwings.

- ✓ Make sure birds have access to fresh, de-iced water all winter.
- ✓ Make grit available this winter to aid birds in seed digestion; fine sand or crushed eggshells will work.
- ✓ Make this peanut butter treat for your birds this winter:  
1 cup peanut butter 1 cup flour  
1 cup shortening 4 cups cornmeal  
Mix ingredients to the consistency of cookie dough. Use in suet logs or set out in shallow containers. Bluebirds love it!
- ✓ Get your birdhouses ready for the spring nesting season. Clean them now and make any necessary repairs.



Did you know?

- ? February is National Bird Feeding Month.
- ? Cardinals can live up to 13 years. Since they don't migrate, one might spend all four seasons in the same backyard.
- ? The Baltimore oriole got its name from its colors (black and orange), the same colors as the coat of arms of the Baron of Baltimore.
- ? Cedar waxwings are named for the red tips on each wing which resembles sealing wax.
- ? The cardinal was the first bird given recognition as a state bird (Kentucky 1926). It is the state bird of 7 different states including Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana.
- ? The downy woodpecker is so named because of the short,

soft feathers around its nostrils.

- ? An ornithologist is a zoologist who studies specific aspects of bird biology.
- ? Birds are so numerous that if you stand outside for 10 minutes anywhere in North America during daylight hours, you will see or hear a bird.
- ? Chickadees' energy needs are so great in the winter that they can't live much more than a day without food.
- ? The front edges of owls' wings are serrated and stiff like the teeth of a comb; this disrupts the flow of air over the wing resulting in silent flight.