

About Audubon

The National Audubon Society protects birds and the places they need, today and tomorrow. Audubon works throughout the Americas using science, advocacy, education, and on-the-ground conservation. State programs, nature centers, chapters, and partners give Audubon an unparalleled wingspan that reaches millions of people each year to inform, inspire, and unite diverse communities in conservation action. A nonprofit conservation organization since 1905, Audubon believes in a world in which people and wildlife thrive.

Visit Audubon online for more information and tips on creating a bird-friendly yard.

www.audubon.org



225 Varick Street
New York, NY 10014
844.428.3826

Written by Stephen W. Kress, PhD
Photography by Camilla Cerea/Audubon

BIRD FEEDING BASICS

Audubon Guide to Birdseed



More than 100 North American bird species supplement their natural diets with birdseed, suet, fruit, and nectar obtained from feeders. Bird feeding can benefit birds and also provides great birdwatching in your own backyard. Different birds are attracted by different kinds of seed, so try offering a variety in separate feeders. Just make sure that the seed is compatible with both the feeder and the birds you hope to attract; homemade recipes offer even more options.

QUICK TIP

Offer a variety of seeds

A variety of seeds will attract the greatest variety of birds. To avoid waste, offer different seeds in different feeders. Black-oil sunflower seed appeals to the greatest number of birds. Offer sunflower seeds, Nyjer® (thistle) seeds, and peanuts in separate feeders.

When using blends, choose mixtures containing sunflower seeds, millet, and cracked corn—the three most popular types of birdseed. Birds that are sunflower specialists will readily eat the sunflower seed and toss the millet and corn to the ground, to be eaten by ground-feeding birds such as sparrows and juncos. Mixtures of peanuts, nuts, and dried fruit are appealing to woodpeckers, nuthatches, and titmice. Relatively few species prefer milo, wheat, and oats, which are featured in less expensive blends.





Black-oil sunflower seed is preferred by many small feeder birds, especially in northern latitudes. Striped sunflower seed is also readily eaten, especially by large-beaked birds. Hulled sunflower seed is eaten by the greatest variety of birds; it attracts jays, Red-Bellied Woodpeckers, goldfinches, Northern Cardinals, Pine Grosbeaks, titmice, nuthatches, and grackles.

White millet is the favorite food of most small-beaked ground-feeding birds; red millet is also readily eaten. Millet attracts quail, doves, juncos, sparrows, towhees, cowbirds, and Red-winged Blackbirds.

Medium cracked corn attracts many kinds of ground-feeding birds, but it is prone to rot, since the interior of the kernel readily soaks up moisture. Feed small amounts, mixed with millet, on feeding tables or from watertight hopper feeders. Avoid fine cracked corn, since it quickly turns to mush; coarse cracked corn is too large for small-beaked birds. Cracked corn attracts quail, doves, jays, juncos, and towhees.

Safflower seed is readily eaten by cardinals, grosbeaks, sparrows, and doves; starlings, House Sparrows, and squirrels usually find it less appealing than sunflower seed.

A preferred food of American Goldfinches, Lesser Goldfinches, House Finches, and Common Redpolls, Nyjer® is sometimes called “black gold,” because it can be expensive compared with other birdseed. Do not confuse it with prickly thistle, a pink-flowered weed used by goldfinches to line their nests.

This mixture attracts insect-eating birds such as woodpeckers, wrens, chickadees, nuthatches, and titmice. Place the suet in special feeders or net onion bags at least five feet above the ground to keep it out of the reach of animals. Although suet is particularly helpful during cold weather and migration, when birds need extra fat reserves, “no melt” suet cakes are now available for use in warmer weather.

Whole and crushed peanuts attract woodpeckers, jays, chickadees, titmice, bushtits, nuthatches, Brown Creepers, wrens, kinglets, Northern Mockingbirds, Brown Thrashers, starlings, and Yellow-rumped and Pine Warblers. Provide these in tube-shaped, metal mesh feeders.

These agricultural products are frequently mixed into low-priced birdseed blends. Most birds discard the uneaten seed in favor of other food, which leaves it to accumulate under feeders, where they may attract rodents. In the Southwest, however, milo attracts pheasants, quail, and doves.

Homemade recipes to add to your bird feeders

Peanut butter is a good substitute for suet in the summer. Mix one part peanut butter with five parts cornmeal and stuff the mixture into holes drilled in a hanging log or into the crevices of a large pine cone. This all-season mixture attracts woodpeckers, chickadees, titmice, and occasionally warblers.

Fruit specialists such as robins, waxwings, bluebirds, and mockingbirds rarely eat birdseed. To attract these birds, soak raisins and currants in water overnight, then place them on a table feeder, or purchase seed blends with a dried fruit mixture. To attract orioles and tanagers, skewer halved oranges onto a spike near other feeders, or provide nectar feeders.

Make a sugar solution of one part white sugar to four parts water. Boil briefly to sterilize the mixture and dissolve the sugar crystals (there's no need to add red food coloring). Feeders must be washed every few days with very hot water and kept scrupulously clean to prevent the growth of mold.

Quick reference seed and food chart

SPECIES

SPECIES	Black-oil Sunflower	Striped Sunflower	Sunflower Hearts	Nyjer (Thistle)	Peanuts	Tree Nuts	Fruit	Millet	Safflower	Milo	Cracked Corn	Suet Cakes
Bluebirds			●				●					●
Buntings			●				●	●				
Cardinals	●	●	●		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	
Chickadees	●	●	●	●	●	●						●
Doves			●	●				●	●	●	●	
Goldfinches	●		●	●				●				●
Grosbeaks	●	●	●						●		●	
House Finches	●		●	●	●			●	●			
Jays	●	●	●		●	●	●	●	●	●	●	●
Juncos			●	●	●			●		●	●	
Mockingbirds							●					●
Nuthatches	●	●	●		●	●	●		●			●
Purple Finches	●		●	●				●				
Quail								●		●	●	
Siskins	●		●	●							●	
Sparrows	●		●	●				●		●	●	
Tanagers			●				●					
Titmice	●	●	●	●	●	●					●	●
Towhees								●		●		
Woodpeckers	●		●		●	●	●					●
Squirrels	●	●	●		●	●	●				●	