



Birds Can Use a Little Help During the Winter

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Photo by dmp2023

The holiday season finds many of us enjoying delicious meals, desserts and other treats. Our feathered friends will also appreciate some seed and other food items during the long, cold winter months as well. So far, however, we New Englanders aren't experiencing the wintry weather that is usually expected this time of year. In fact, 2023 was a year filled with curious weather and one outcome, perhaps the result of all the rain, was that trees, shrubs and other plants produced an abundance of fruits, nuts and other seeds. Not only has the Center received many questions about the plethora of white pinecones littering people's yards but also the lack of birds at well-stocked feeders this time of year.

According to Audubon, bird populations naturally vary. This can be due to migration, the availability of natural food sources, relocation of existing feeders, the arrival of predators like cats and hawks, extreme weather events and other factors. The folks at the Bird Store in Sturbridge noted that this was an extraordinary seed producing or mast year and the vast quantities of natural seeds, nuts and other food items are likely the main reason for fewer birds at area feeders. As we New Englanders say, give it a minute and the weather will change, so it is likely cold, wintry weather will descend on us and once again birds will be flocking to our feeders.

A reliable food supply during the harsh winter months can improve the survival of many overwintering bird species. Birds expend much effort collecting sufficient food each day to provide enough energy to get through those cold winter nights. Many bird species even lower

their body temperatures during the night to conserve energy. This leaves them lethargic in the morning and more vulnerable to predators. A Swedish study on one species found that birds that had access to well stocked feeders needed to lower their body temperatures less than those without supplemental seed and this may improve survival and also, their immune systems.

Keep some tips in mind when feeding the birds in your yard. If possible, set up several feeders in more than one location. Different kinds of food can be offered in the various feeders. High energy suet and suet blended with seeds are especially attractive to woodpeckers, nuthatches, crows and chickadees. Sunflowers, peanut hearts and safflower seeds draw cardinals, blue jays and titmice and many more. Ground feeding birds like mourning doves, juncos, some finches and sparrows gather on platform feeders filled with cracked corn, white proso millet, and other treats. While these birds will forage on the ground, if possible, make or buy a platform feeder with drainage holes or a roof so the seed won't spoil or sprout on the ground. Raising these feeders above ground level keeps them cleaner and less accessible to predators.

Where feeders are hung is very important. It is estimated that at least 150 million (if not more) birds die because they fly into windows each year in just the U.S. Place feeders either within 3 feet of a window so they can't reach speeds to injure themselves if they are startled and fly into the window or at least 30 feet away.



Titmouse on feeder. Photo by dmp2023

Birdseed is more expensive this year just like many other items. In part, the additional cost comes from increased labor and transportation costs, but it also can be attributed to the war in Ukraine, which has been a major sunflower seed producer. Read the ingredients when purchasing birdseed. Ingredients like red millet and oats are fillers and do not appeal to many bird species and will just be wasted.

Many birds appreciate sliced up fruit, like apples and pears. Also, unsalted peanuts and other nuts as well as dried fruit like raisins may draw a larger number of species to your yard. Fresh water

is also sought after during the cold winter. Try a solar sipper, heated birdbath, or other method for providing it.

Keep your feeders filled so birds know where and what food sources are available to them. Select feeders that can be easily cleaned and wash them out every week or so. Just like colds and other viruses and infections can spread among humans, birds can get sick from infected avian visitors.

While providing birdseed is a great way to attract and help birds through the cold winter months, do consider making your yard more bird friendly by providing evergreens for shelter and berry and seed producing plants that would supply natural foods for them. Leave some seed heads on your perennial plants, avoid using pesticides and set out birdhouses during the breeding season and roosting boxes during the winter. Like many creatures in this world, bird populations are decreasing. According to the National Audubon Society, the number of birds in North America has declined by 3 billion over the last 50 years. Any little thing we can do to improve their chances of survival will benefit them and the natural world on which we depend as well.

For more information on birds, check out www.audubon.org or www.birds.cornell.edu. For your gardening questions, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.homegarden.cahnr.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.