

Wintertime Bird Feeding

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

As we settle into the heart of winter, the cold, the snow and the clouds can become somewhat depressing. A simple thing that families can do to provide a good family activity is to hang some bird feeders in your yard. With just a little basic landscaping (a few trees and shrubs) and a couple of bird feeders, most homeowners can have great success in attracting birds which can bring hours of enjoyment watching their feeding activities.

Like people, different bird species have different food preferences as well as how they want that food presented. Doves, juncos and sparrows prefer food on the ground or very near the ground. White proso millet is one of their favorites. Cardinals like an open trough type of feeder or feed scattered on the ground. Safflower seed seems to be a real favorite of cardinals. The little goldfinches like some type of hanging feeder. A hanging tube feeder with thistle seed in it is a favorite for finches of all types.

The one bird feed that does seem to hold nearly universal acceptance though is black oil sunflower. There are actually three types of sunflower seeds available in the bird feed trade, but the striped sunflowers, while preferred by humans, is far less accepted by birds than black oil sunflower. The smallest finches up to cardinals and even squirrels and deer will show a strong preference to black oil sunflower. This seed packs a whopping 25% protein and 40% oil or fat. The protein helps keep the small birds going and the oil is an essential energy source to help them stay warm in cold weather.

While black oil sunflower seed may be a little more expensive, it is going to be more universally utilized by all bird species resulting in far less waste. For that reason it is my number one recommendation for bird feeding. Mixes that contain a lot of corn, wheat, milo or oats may be a lot cheaper, but there's going to be a lot more waste as the birds pick through it for the few sunflower seeds or millet that may also be in there.

Place your feeder(s) where they can be easily viewed from the house. Cats are the number one predator of birds so keep your cat indoors or provide trees close by where the birds can fly to quickly to escape the feline predator. The Christmas tree that you just took down, assuming it was a real tree, can be laid on the ground near the feeders to provide additional cover and shelter. Feeders can be fairly close to the house, in fact I have one hung right off the eaves outside my kitchen window. But remember that the closer to the house the feeder is, the more likely birds are to be spooked by noises and motion from inside.

Suet feeders are a nice addition to the back yard feeding choices. Suet is processed beef fat, often mixed with seed and provided in nice blocks that are easy to hang in a metal feeder. Suet is a great attractant for woodpeckers as well as nuthatches, chickadees and creepers.

The final thing that will really attract a lot of birds into your backyard is a heated bird bath. Open water, especially in winter weather like we've been seeing lately, can be hard to come by so providing a heated bird bath in your backyard can draw in a lot of birds, including species like bluebirds and waxwings that won't feed on all the seed that you've placed around the yard.

While some back yard bird feeders, like myself, can get really carried away with feeders and bird bath options, one or two simple bird feeders will do an adequate job of attracting the birds. So put out a feeder, fill up a cup with coffee and let mother nature bring you a little enjoyment and a splash of color for you winter!

