

## **Bird Feeding Demystified**

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Backyard bird feeding is annually a multi-billion dollar business in the US. I've seen estimates of over \$40 billion that is spent on bird feeding and bird housing per year. It is really big business. Watching birds at backyard bird feeders is entertaining, multiple generations of a family can enjoy it, on a personal level it is fairly inexpensive and let's be honest, it's just plain fun at times! On a snowy weekend day during January it can be pleasant entertainment while you are safe and warm in your home.

However, I run into homeowners who are frustrated with their backyard birdfeeding adventures. I hear complaints that they aren't getting the birds that they want, or perhaps the birds are throwing 3/4 of the bird seed on the ground. Squirrels can be both entertaining and frustrating but I'm not going to deal with them in today's column. But let's look at the issue of who comes to your feeders and why.

The most commonly fed bird seed can be broken down into two types of feeds: grains and oil seeds. Grains are things like millet (the small white or brown shiny seed), milo, corn, wheat or oats. These are fairly low in protein and high in starch. Oil seeds are things like sunflower, safflower (looks like white sunflower seeds), peanuts and thistle seed (the tiny little black seeds). These are high in oil and high in protein. Birds, like people, have preferences in food as well as preferences in how it is presented.

The first feeder that many homeowners put in their yard is frequently one that hangs from a bracket on a post or a tree branch. The birds that come to these sorts of feeders are cardinals, finches, chickadees, nuthatches etc. The very bird species that most homeowners want to see. These birds want oil seeds like black oil sunflower. They don't really want grains. If you fill this feeder with a seed mix that has a lot of grain, many of the species will throw it on the ground getting to the few sunflower seeds that might be in the feeder. A lot of this waste can be avoided by simply buying bags of sunflower seeds and only filling it with this. The per pound cost may be more, but there'll be less waste.

Grains are consumed by many bird species. But most of these species prefer to feed on the ground or at very low levels. These species include doves and the true sparrows which includes juncos, Harris's Sparrows and other sparrow species. Cardinals will also feed at ground level so putting out a few sunflower seeds in your low or ground feeders is also a good idea.

In long term studies the number one most popular single bird feed was black oil sunflower seeds. Number two on that list is white proso millet. After that we fall into things like safflower, thistle seed (not related to the noxious weed thistles we have here in Kansas), peanuts and even suet. If you are using hanging feeders focus on black oil sunflower. If you want to use ground or low feeders put out white proso millet mixed with some sunflower seeds. Grains like milo, corn and wheat will be eaten but are far less preferred. Soybeans seem to only be eaten by larger species like waterfowl which most of us probably don't want in our backyards!

Suet is going to be preferred by woodpeckers, nuthatches and in colder weather many different species as it provides a lot of energy to help the birds keep warm. A bird bath with an electric heater is also a good way to attract birds to your back yard. Backyard bird feeding is fun and will bring hours of enjoyment to your family. Through careful selection of types of feeds and feeders you can reduce the number or unwanted species and increase the likelihood of attracting the birds you really want to see!