

## Backyard Bird Feeding: *Some basic information on feeding wild birds in the garden*

By Dr. Bernard S. Jackson, Curator of MUN Botanical Garden, 1971-1993

Though a large number of our bird species leave the province at the approach of winter, there are a number of interesting types that stay here. Some of these birds, such as the junco, starling, boreal chickadee, black-capped chickadee, purple finch, American goldfinch, red-breasted nuthatch, pine siskin, blue jay, northern flicker, hairy woodpecker, house sparrow, brown creeper and downy woodpecker, can be induced to feed at homemade 'feeding stations' within many city and suburban gardens. The colourful evening grosbeaks that visit this province during the winter months may also be encouraged to feed if a steady supply of sunflower seed is provided.

Feeding birds in winter is not only interesting and fun to do, but is also a good conservation practice if carried out properly. Four very important factors must be continually borne in mind if you are going to start a feeding project.

### #1

Once you have started encouraging birds by artificial feeding (a good time to start is at the end of August), **you must continue to provide suitable food** until the arrival of that time of year when sufficient natural food is available to them. If you start a feeding project and then stop during the winter months, you may be responsible for the death of many birds, so do not start feeding birds unless you are prepared to keep it up.

### #2

The right type of food must be provided. Birds are unable to survive cold weather and periods of food scarcity without an adequate supply of vitamin A. Different birds also eat different kinds of food. If a variety of birds are visiting you, then a variety of food must be put out for them. Remember that there are many kinds of food birds will eat (e.g., bread crumbs, wheat, oats and barley, etc.) that cannot by themselves provide the necessary requirements for survival. Some birds will only eat one type of food, for example the brown creeper will eat only beef suet. Beef suet is animal fat and is an excellent source of energy for birds during the winter. It should not be used in mild weather as it will turn rancid rather quickly. Beef suet from the butcher or pork or beef fat scraps is preferred by the birds. It has been our experience here at MUN Botanical Garden that birds will not eat suet rendered with chicken fat. Also here at the Garden we have observed that local birds do not prefer cracked corn (unless it is broken into small pieces), wheat, oats or barley. They do like millet (the little round seeds) and sunflower seeds, so if a bag of bird seed appears to be a good bargain, check the ingredients. If there is a high proportion of corn, barley, wheat, etc. You may inadvertently be feeding the local rodent population.

Incidentally, ducks and grouse **WILL** eat cracked corn and wheat. Here at the Garden we have found that feeding our ducks this mixture not only keeps them healthy, but also gulls are not attracted to the food.

### #3

Birds should not be feed in a location that places them in danger from predators. The two main predators around the city and suburban gardens to be on the watch for are cats and human vandals. If you have a pet cat and still want to feed the birds, suitable precautions for the birds' safety should be arranged. The feeder may be placed in the open, making it more difficult for the cat to approach unseen. An inverted metal funnel may be placed on the stake that supports the feeder and a collar with small bell can be put around the cat's neck to eliminate its silent approach to the birds.

### #4

If you live in or near a wooded area you may find red squirrels turning up in your feeder. These animals will eat the larger seeds but are particularly fond of peanuts. Though they are attractive, interesting creatures, they are great destroyers of birds' nests. For this reason they are a doubtful blessing and possibly should not be encouraged. Unfortunately, once they have found your feeder there appears to be very little you can do about it.

## How Much and When to Feed:

Generally speaking, you should keep a quantity of mixed food available to the birds at all times during the hours of daylight. This is often difficult if there are large numbers of birds are limited funds. Suet or fat scraps are quite inexpensive and lasts a long time, especially in hard weather; it should not be difficult to keep a quantity of this food available to the birds at all times. Beef suet or fat scraps can be put in plastic netting, such as an old onion bag, and then hung from a tree branch, a clothesline, or from the feeder itself. If you can find that keeping mixed food available all day is too impractical, wait until the birds are continually using your feeding station and then develop the habit of feeding them twice (or three times) a day at a regular time. Try 8:00-9:00 a.m. and then 2:00-3:00 p.m. Birds quickly learn regular feeding times and will soon be waiting for you to appear with the food

Evening grosbeaks are voracious feeders and can 'eat you out of house and home' if you let them. Only put out as much sunflower seed each day as you can afford, and then let them go away to scrounge off somebody else. They will be back the next day to see if there is anything for them. Since they are nomadic they can easily move on to where food is plentiful.

## Location:

Birds should not be fed in a location that places them in danger from predators, including the neighbourhood cat. The feeder should be placed in the open, making it more difficult for predators to approach unseen.

## Water:

Though many northern birds will eat snow, they will drink fresh water when it is provided for them. It is hard to keep water from freezing in winter, but a shallow dish of slightly warm water placed out each feeding time should prove helpful.

### Keeping Notes:

You will find it worth while to keep notes on the type and numbers of birds visiting you in a daily diary. Also make a note of what type of bird eats what type of food.

### When to Start? When to Stop?:

Ideally, to attract birds to your feeder you should start offering small amounts of food as early as September. While we usually stop feeding them here at the Garden once the warm weather arrives, many people continue to feed them throughout the year. It is important during the winter months that once you start to feed them, you DO NOT STOP. The local bird population will become dependent on you for food and you could be responsible for the deaths of many birds if you stop feeding even for just a short time. We recommend you do not start a feeder project unless you are prepared to keep it up.

### Housekeeping:

Your winter feeder should be cleaned on a regular basis. Each time you add seed the old seed and chaff should be scraped out and discarded. Scrubbing the inside of the feeder with a mild bleach solution on a regular basis will greatly reduce the risk of disease outbreak amongst the flock. Wet or mouldy food should always be discarded.

### Bird Watching:

Having trouble identifying the birds at your feeder? Bird watching with an experienced guide is an excellent and enjoyable way to discover the birds of our area. During our open season (May 1 – Nov 30) walks are held every second Sunday morning. Also, private tours may be arranged in advance for groups of 10 or more. Please call us for more details.

### Build Your Own Birdfeeder:

We are experimenting with a variety of feeders throughout the nature reserve. A simple feeder can be made by making large holes in a hanging junk of wood and filling the holes with a mixture of seed and peanut butter or suet.

### Further Information:

For further information on bird feeding and conservation, please drop by the Field Centre on Mount Scio Road during opening hours.

## Providing the Right Food:

Birds cannot survive the cold weather and periods of food scarcity without an adequate supply of vitamin A; therefore the right type of food must be provided. While birds may eat bread, wheat, oats, etc., these foods do not provide the necessary requirements for survival. Bread can even be harmful to birds, as it does not fulfill any nutritional requirements and is lacking in food energy. In winter a bird's evening meal must provide enough 'body fuel' to sustain the bird through a cold winter night.

## Variety – The Spice of Life:

Different birds eat different types of food. Therefore, if you have a variety of species at your feeder you should provide a variety of foods. The common flicker (a type of woodpecker) will not eat seed **mixtures**, **but will** eat suet. Brown creepers will only eat suet, while juncos and chickadees will eat a variety of foods.

### Suggested Foods for Some Local Birds

	Beef suet fat scraps	Peanuts	Broken dog biscuits	Small seed mixtures	Chopped fruit and vegetables	Sunflower seeds	Peanut butter	Cracked corn	Mixed table scraps
Junco	▪	▪		▪	▪	▪	▪	▪	▪
Chickadee	▪	▪	▪	▪	▪		▪	▪	▪
Flicker	▪			▪					
Woodpecker	▪	▪		▪	▪				
Brown Creeper	▪			▪					
Purple Finch	▪	▪					▪		
Starling	▪				▪			▪	▪
House Sparrow					▪	▪	▪	▪	▪
Other Sparrows							▪		
Evening Grosbeak		▪				▪			
American Robin	▪			▪					▪
Pine Siskin							▪		
Pigeon					▪	▪	▪	▪	
Blue Jay	▪	▪			▪	▪		▪	▪

### WARNING

**If you are feeding birds as a school or group project, be aware that some peanut allergies can be life threatening. Peanuts and peanut butter should be avoided if anyone in your group has allergies; also, check to see if your seed mixture was processed in a peanut-free facility.**

Your Feedback is Welcome:

"From Garden to Classroom" outreach program incorporates environmental stewardship practices which have been promoted and used at MUN Botanical Garden since its inception in 1971. The Garden's education programs are the basis for many of these outreach activities. We hope the "From Garden to Classroom" outreach program will provide a unique opportunity to engage young people in hands-on activities, which may encourage proactive attitudes and behaviours in areas of environmental protection, conservation and enhancement. The hands-on activities are curriculum-designed; while all programs supplement the science curriculum, we encourage teachers to make connections to other subject areas. Feedback, stories and suggestions are always welcome and are an integral part of the development of this education program. Comments may be forwarded to Anne Madden, education coordinator, MUN Botanical Garden (amadden@mun.ca).