

BIRD FEEDING: TIPS FOR BEGINNERS AND VETERANS

SCOTT R. CRAVEN AND ROBERT L. RUFF



"Cardinals" by Owen J. Gromme,
courtesy of Wild Wings, Lake City, Minn.



B I R D F E E D I N G T I P S F O R



CONTENTS

| |
|---------------------------------|
| Introduction, 1 |
| Feeders, 2 |
| Feeder Placement, 4 |
| Food, 5 |
| Some Tips on Buying Birdseed, 7 |
| Water and Grit, 7 |
| Coping with Squirrels, 8 |
| Sanitation, 9 |
| Pest Birds, 10 |
| Some General Tips, 10 |

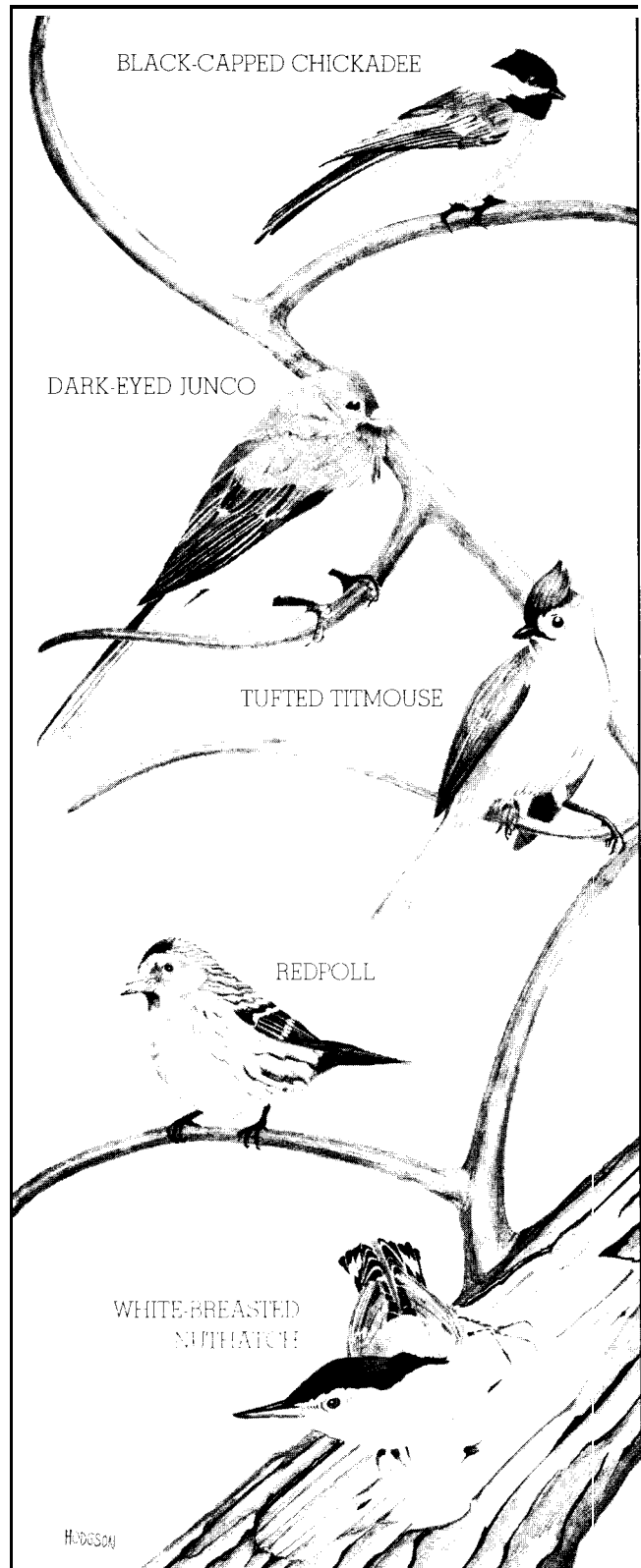
Bird feeding is one of the most popular ways to enjoy wildlife. In 1975, researchers estimated that one out of every five American households fed birds. We suspect the activity is even more popular today. Americans spent an estimated 170 million dollars on bird seed in 1975. The annual figure is now probably close to half a billion dollars.

Bird feeding is the only interaction many people have with wildlife. Relative to many other forms of recreation, it is an inexpensive activity. Birds are diverse, colorful and entertaining; they add life to a sometimes monotonous winter landscape. Watching birds at a feeder is excellent therapy for people confined indoors by illness, accident or winter weather. Feeders bring birds in close where they can be observed, identified, photographed or simply enjoyed.

Most amateur and professional ornithologists feel that feeding is mutually beneficial to birds and people, but it may not always be entirely in the bird's best interests. Feeding reduces natural competition among birds and can subject them to diseases and predation. Certain species—the cardinal is a good example—have extended their ranges further and further north in recent years, probably in response to the availability of feeders. Depending on one's outlook, such range extension can be viewed as good or bad.

There are certainly right and wrong ways to attract and feed birds. Feeding can be harmful if it is not continued through the winter. The severity of the weather and availability of natural foods and other feeding stations in the neighborhood determine the actual potential for harm. Before setting up a feeding station, be sure you are willing to make a commitment to maintain a dependable food supply throughout the winter and to keep the health and safety of the birds in mind.

This booklet is a basic guide for the beginner just embarking on the hobby of feeding birds, but it should also help veterans improve their feeding stations. It contains tips that will help you maximize your feathered guests' benefit and safety, deal with pests and select equipment and food. If you heed the cautions, both you and the birds should enjoy the experience.



COMMON WINTER BIRDS

FEEDERS

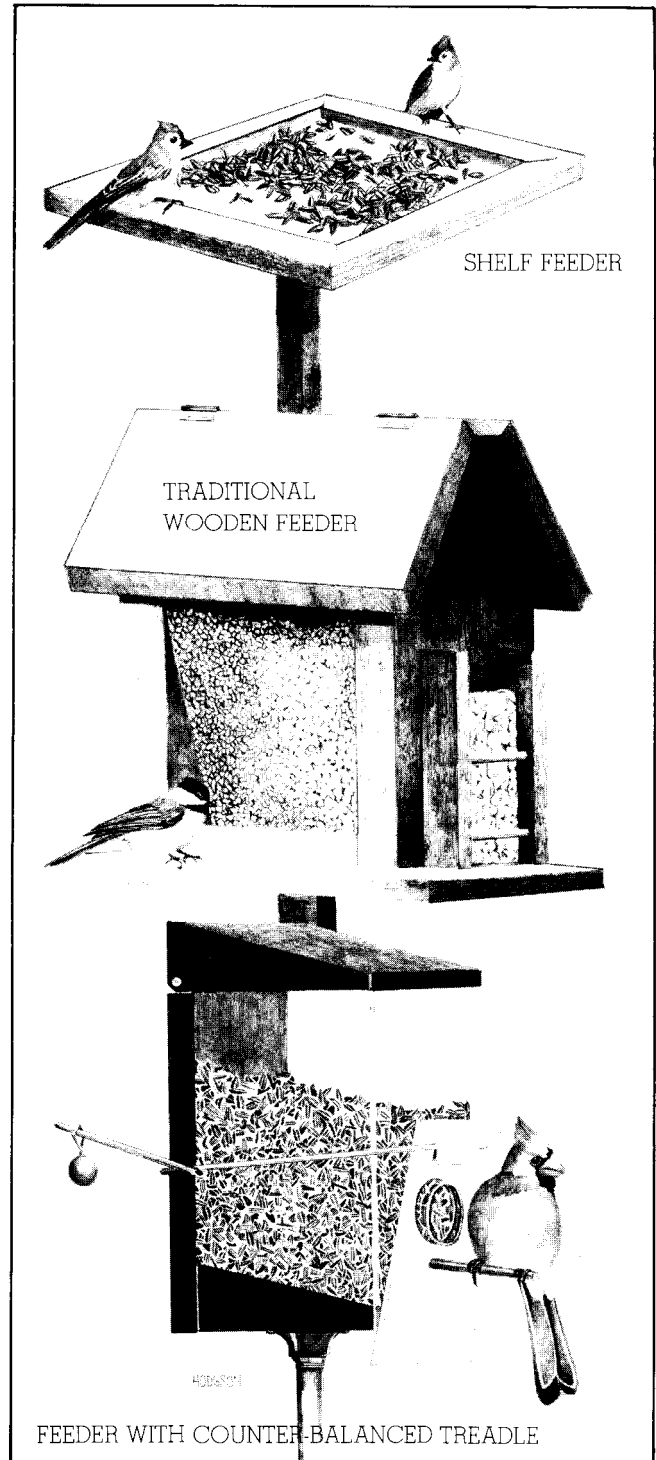
There are nearly as many sizes and styles of feeders as there are species of birds to attract to them. A feeding station may be one simple feeder or a dozen or more different ones scattered around a yard. Let your interest and financial resources determine your level of involvement.

The SHELF FEEDER consists of a simple platform which can be mounted on a post or attached to a window sill. It suits many different species. Can be built easily and inexpensively at home, and is easy to fill with seed. On the negative side, it is exposed to snow and rain (unless you put a roof on it), and provides easy access for squirrels. In addition, large quantities of seeds can be scratched from the feeder onto the ground.

The TRADITIONAL WOODEN FEEDER is really a shelf with a roof and several modifications for dispensing a variety of food items. Typically, it has a glass or plastic hopper that holds and dispenses seeds to the feeding area by gravity. Some models have rack-like structures on the ends to hold suet cakes and/or wooden pegs on which to impale bakery products or scraps to prevent them from being carried away whole. This type of feeder is usually mounted on a post or railing and is suitable for most birds. If you are considering only one feeder, this is probably the best style to select.

More sophisticated versions of this type of feeder may be made of metal or plastic and may include modifications to keep squirrels off, increase seed holding and dispensing capacity, or feed only certain species. We will discuss anti-squirrel tactics later. Feeders can be made selective for certain species through the use of a counter-balanced treadle device as a feeding perch. The device can be set to close off access to the seed when a heavy bird such as a pigeon, crow, or grackle lands to feed, while allowing smaller, more "desirable" species to feed without interference.

Whether you want to select for certain species is, of course, a matter of personal preference. A bird one person considers a pest may be another's favorite. There are other methods to favor certain species; specialized feeders and special food items may be just as effective.



Woodpeckers and nuthatches can be attracted to suet feeders or log feeders. A SUEET FEEDER can be as simple as a mesh bag—such as an onion bag—filled with suet and hung from a limb. Or it can be a basket constructed from scrap wood and 1/4-inch mesh hardware cloth. Melted, suet can be mixed with a dry food and packed into virtually any kind of mold or container.

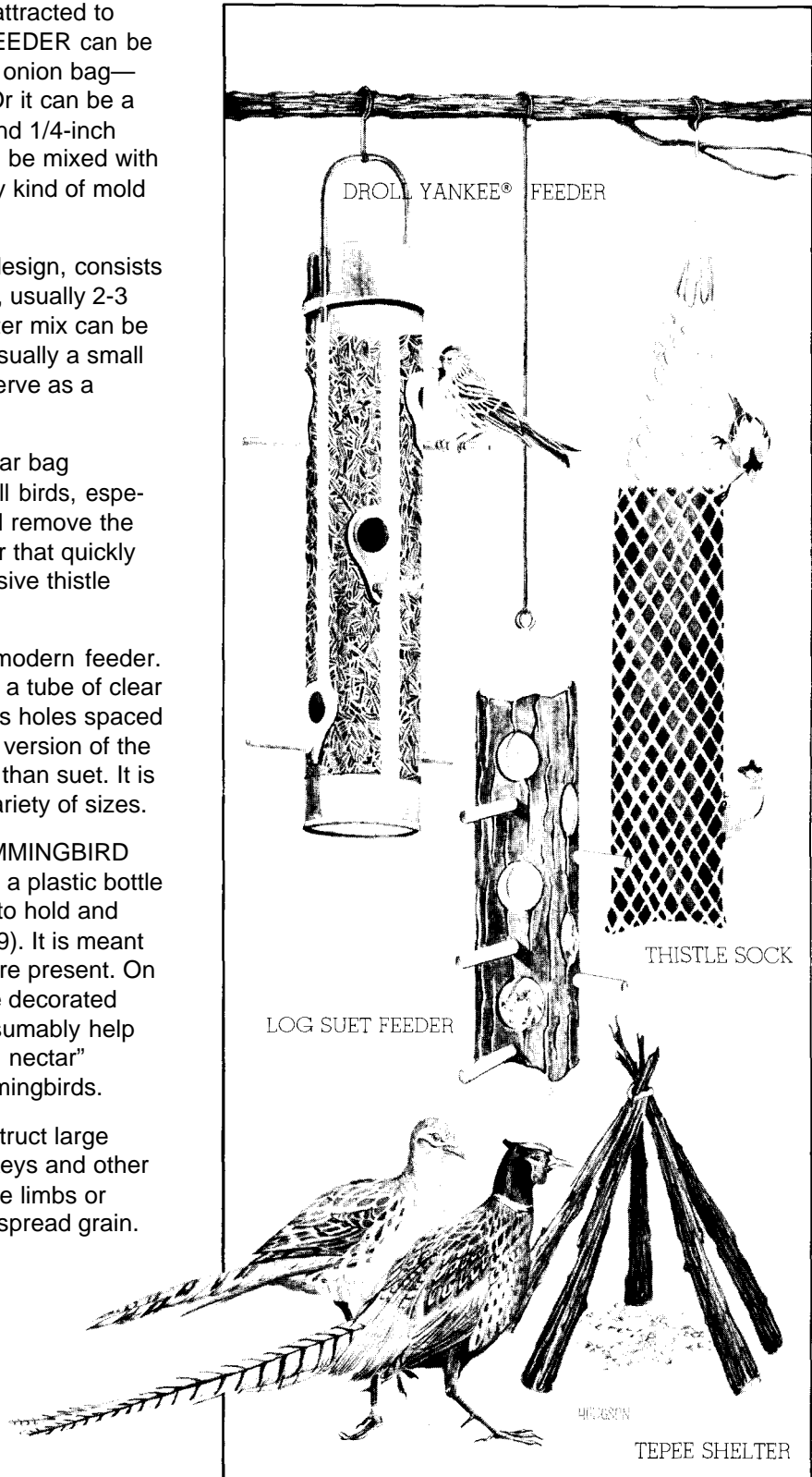
The LOG FEEDER, a common rustic design, consists of a 1- or 2-foot section of a log or limb, usually 2-3 inches in diameter. Suet or peanut butter mix can be packed into holes bored into the log. Usually a small peg is added just below each hole to serve as a perch.

A THISTLE SOCK is a fine-mesh tubular bag designed to dispense thistle seed. Small birds, especially goldfinches, cling to the sock and remove the small seeds. It is an inexpensive feeder that quickly pays for itself by conserving the expensive thistle seeds.

The DROLL YANKEE[®] is a popular, modern feeder. The Yankee and its imitators consist of a tube of clear plastic with feeding perches and access holes spaced evenly through the tube. It is a modern version of the log feeder that dispenses seeds rather than suet. It is efficient and durable and comes in a variety of sizes.

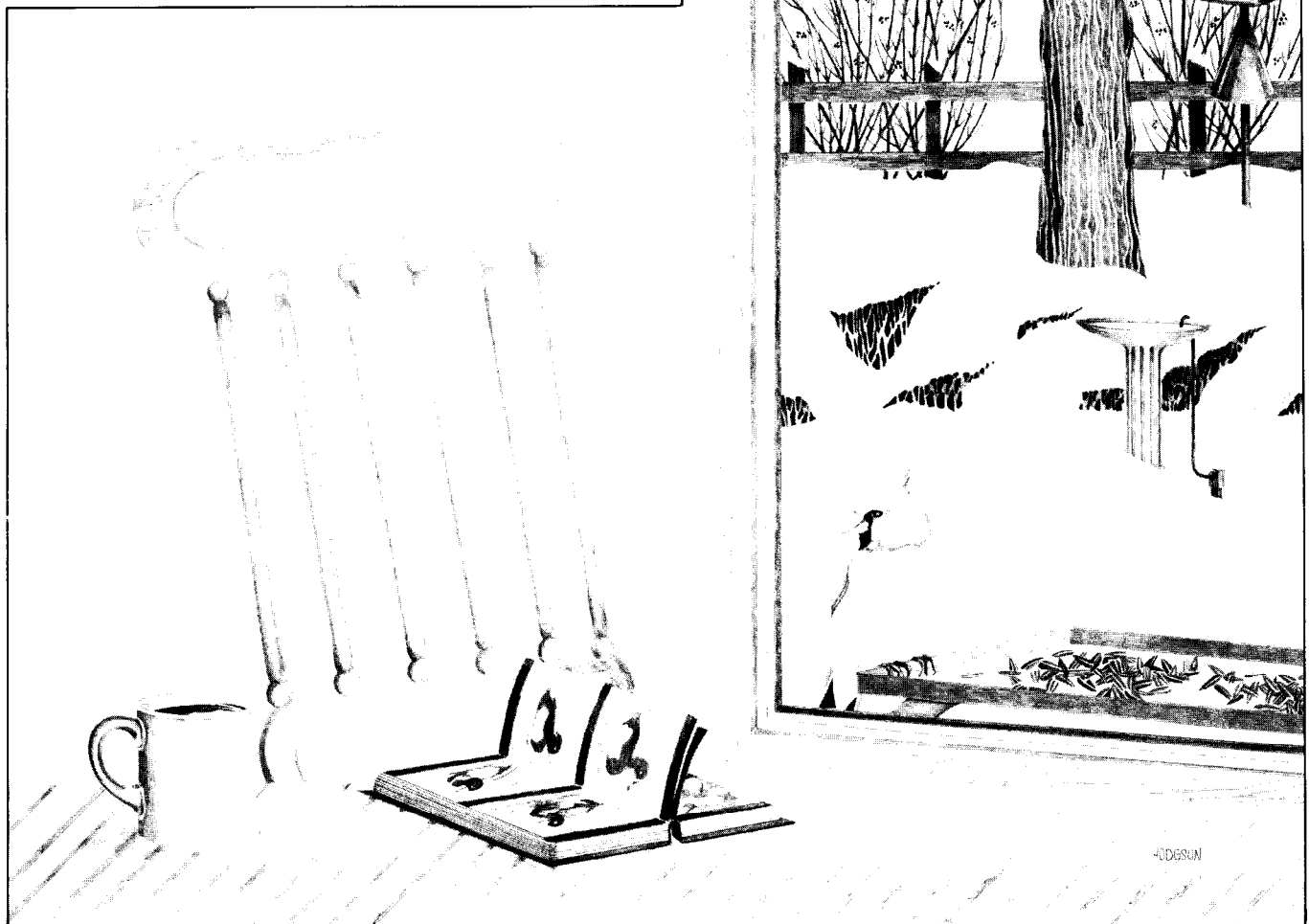
Another specialized feeder is the HUMMINGBIRD FEEDER. The most common version is a plastic bottle fitted with one or more tubular funnels to hold and dispense sugar water (illustrated on p. 9). It is meant for summer use, when hummingbirds are present. On many models, the dispensing tubes are decorated with colorful plastic flowers, which presumably help hummingbirds find the feeder. "instant nectar" powders are available for feeding hummingbirds.

If you live in a rural area, you can construct large feeders to attract pheasants, quail, turkeys and other species. A tepee or lean-to made of tree limbs or lumber provides shelter and a place to spread grain.



FEEDER PLACEMENT

You should consider several things when deciding where to place feeders. First, you will want them to be visible from a favorite kitchen or living room window—after all, seeing and enjoying birds is one of the main reasons for feeding them. Second, feeders should be sheltered from prevailing winds and snow drifts that make filling difficult or unpleasant. Third, feeders mounted on poles or suspended from limbs or wires should be 5-6 feet from the ground. Fourth, and perhaps most important from the birds' standpoint, feeders should be near cover—shrubs, trees or both—to provide a place of retreat from cats or other threats, a gradual approach route for “shy” birds, or a convenient perch for opening a sunflower seed. We recommend having some cover within 5 feet.



FOOD

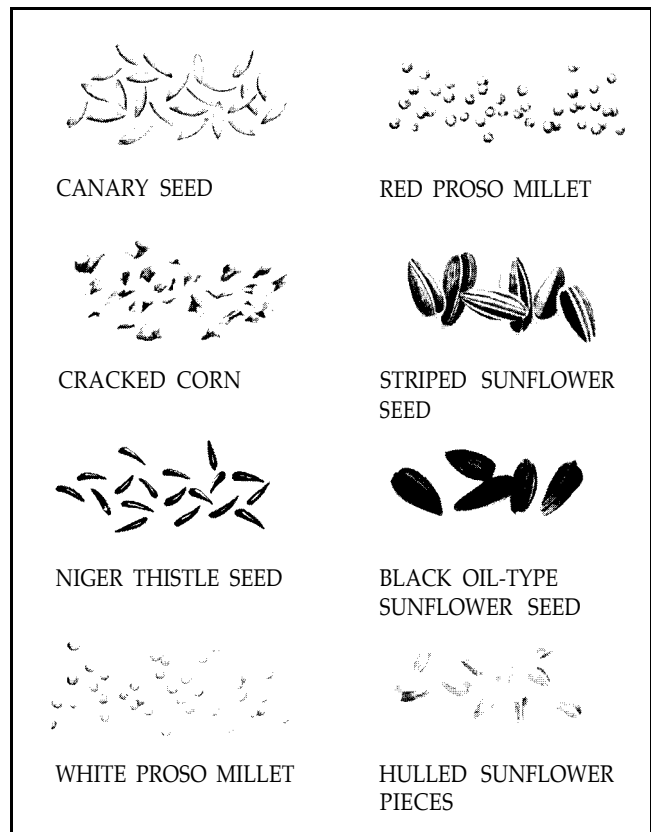
The food you provide is more important than feeder design in determining the success of your feeding station, both in terms of numbers and species of birds you attract. Seeds may be purchased by individual variety or in mixed form. What and how you buy will depend on a number of factors such as bird-feeding goals, cost and availability. The United States Fish and Wildlife Service has determined the food preference of common bird species:

| | |
|------------------------|---|
| Goldfinch | thistle seeds*, hulled sunflower seeds, oil-type sunflower seeds |
| Blue Jay | whole peanut kernels, large striped sunflower seeds |
| Brown-headed Cowbird | white proso millet, other millets, canary seeds |
| Cardinal | oil-type sunflower seeds, large striped sunflower seeds, safflower seeds |
| Chickadee | oil-type sunflower seeds, large striped sunflower seeds, hulled sunflower seeds |
| Dark-eyed Junco | red and white proso millet, canary seeds, fine cracked corn |
| Grackle | hulled sunflower seeds, cracked corn |
| Evening Grosbeak | oil-type sunflower seeds, large striped sunflower seeds |
| House Sparrow | white proso millet, most small seeds |
| Mourning Dove | oil-type sunflower seeds, white and red proso millet |
| Purple Finch | oil-type sunflower seeds, large sunflower seeds, millets |
| Song Sparrow | white proso millet, red proso millet |
| Starling | peanut hearts and hulled oats, table scraps |
| Tree Sparrow | red proso millet, white proso millet, fine cracked corn |
| Tufted Titmouse | peanut kernels, all types of sunflower |
| White-crowned Sparrow | oil-type sunflower, white proso millet |
| White-throated Sparrow | same as white-crowned |

*Thistle seed is not related to our native weedy thistles. It is an imported seed and is not adapted to northern climates

Many of the seeds commonly found in inexpensive commercial mixes—such as wheat, mile, peanut hearts, hulled oats and rice—are relatively unattractive to most birds. These commercial mixes may be cheaper, but you will attract as many or more birds with “preferred” seeds. This does not mean that unattractive seeds will not be eaten, but preferred seeds will be eaten first and tend to attract birds that might not otherwise visit a feeder. Thistle seeds, hulled sunflower seeds and fine-cracked corn are very useful for attracting particular species.

Overall, small black oil-type sunflower seeds and white proso millet give the most for your bird-feeding dollar. The larger, more familiar gray- or black-striped sunflower seeds are also excellent food, but given a choice, most birds take the small black ones. All sunflower seeds have high caloric value. About 70 percent of the weight of an oil-type seed is kernel, compared to 57 percent for the traditional types. Although not as well known as the striped sunflower seeds, the black seeds are as readily available and sell for about the same price or less.

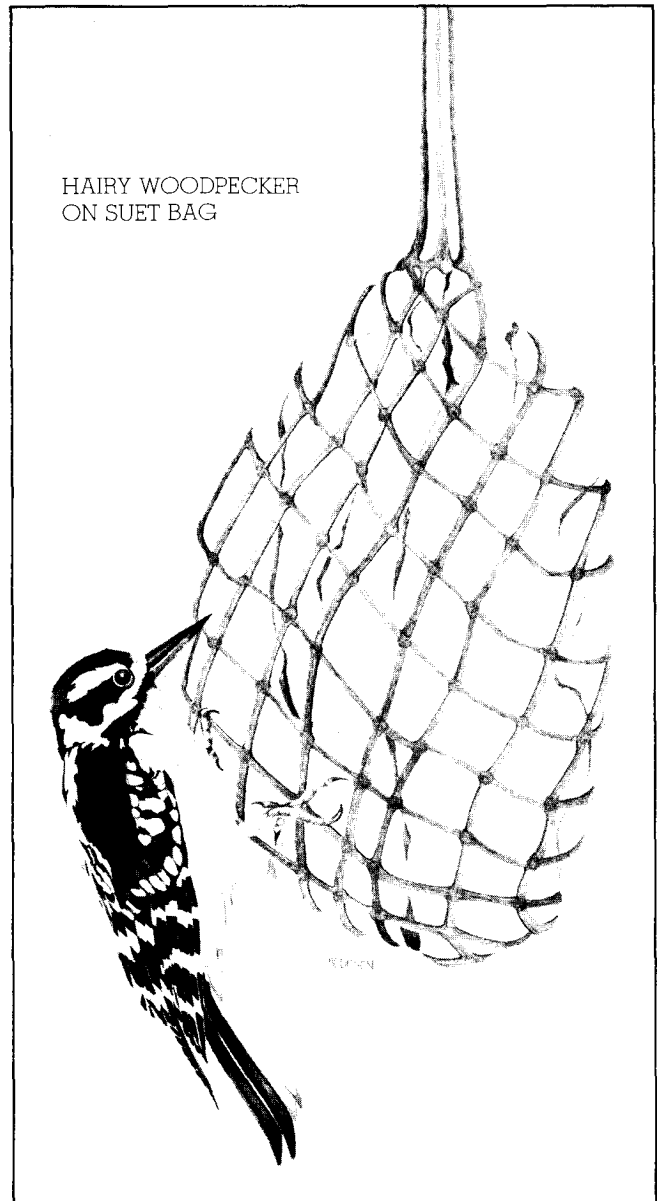


Seeds are drawn two-thirds actual size.

Suet is very attractive to a number of species, especially woodpeckers and chickadees. Most people use beef suet, but hunters will find that suet from a deer is also quite attractive. Beef suet used to be free for the asking at the local butcher shop or grocery store. But you will probably have to pay for it now—its popularity as a bird food has created a market for it. Suet can be fed “as is” or melted and mixed with dry foods to attract a variety of species. We recommend combining suet with oatmeal, hulled sunflower kernels, peanut hearts, or cracked corn to obtain a mix that is entirely edible. Whole seeds can be provided more efficiently in other feeders. Bacon fat can be used, but tends to be soft and messy. Peanut butter can be used in the same way and is very attractive but also quite expensive. Mix peanut butter with dry foods, suet or both because birds can choke on straight peanut butter.

Seed supplies can be supplemented with stale bakery products, table scraps and fruit, but these foods have some disadvantages. Fruit is attractive to robins, starlings, mockingbirds, catbirds and orioles, and so it is better as summer food than as winter food. (But diced apples and raisins are good for helping robins through late spring storms). Table scraps and bread often attract less desirable species, such as house sparrows, starlings, grackles and pigeons.

Most attempts to grow bird food in a backyard garden meet with failure. Birds usually harvest sunflower seeds themselves long before you get the chance, and the yield of other seeds does not justify the effort required. But you may want to plant bird food-producing shrubs and trees as part of your landscaping. Consult University of Wisconsin—Extension publication G1609, *Landscape Plants that Attract Birds*.



SOME TIPS ON BUYING BIRDSEED

BUY IN BULK. Buying seeds in quantity is substantially cheaper. Buying in 50-pound bags will not only save money, but you can get the seeds you want and make your own mixes. Do not underestimate the quantity of seed you may use. While 50 pounds of seeds may last all season at an urban feeder, an active, rural feeding station may use 500 pounds or more in a single winter.

BE PREPARED — at least mentally—for the costs at the start of the season so that you will not have to close down your feeder in mid-January for financial reasons. Thistle seed at up to \$2 a pound can add up very quickly if you are fortunate enough to have a flock of hungry goldfinches in the neighborhood. It is better to put out less-expensive (and less-preferred) commercial mixes for the entire feeding season than to stop feeding in mid-season.

BEFORE BUYING SEEDS for the winter, check with local Audubon Society chapters, nature centers or sportsmen's clubs. Many of these organizations sell seed as a fund-raising activity. The seed is usually of good quality and reasonably priced, and your money will help the birds through the organizations' conservation activities.

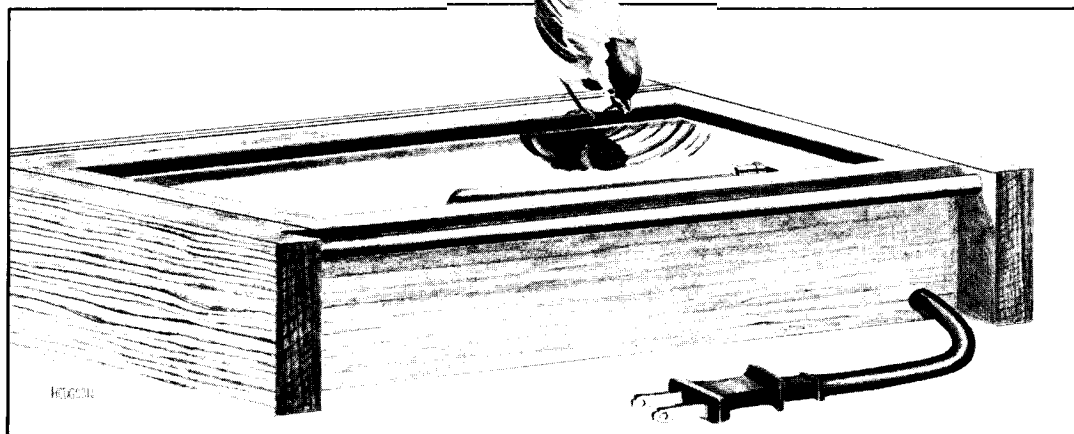
STORE YOUR SEED IN A DRY PLACE. Plastic or metal trash cans with tight-fitting lids make excellent storage containers. For smaller quantities, you may be able to get 5-gallon plastic buckets at cheese factories, ice cream parlors or other food-handling establishments.

WATER AND GRIT

These materials are not foods, but they can make a feeding station more attractive. By providing water, which birds use for both drinking and bathing, you may save your birds a long flight to a natural source in very cold weather. Several commercial watering trays are available, but you can use almost any shallow container (the container must be shallow if the birds are to bathe in it). A wooden frame makes perching for a drink easier. Small heating elements, available from bird-feeding equipment suppliers, farmers' co-ops and some hardware stores, will keep the water from freezing. If birds do not seem to notice the water you provide, create a slight drip with a hose or faucet to disturb the surface; this should attract them.

Birds need grit to digest their food. They use it like teeth to grind the food, although they may obtain minerals from some of it. Roadsides and sanded sidewalks are common winter sources of grit, but many birds will accept it readily if it is offered in addition to foods. Do not mix grit with seeds. Coarse sand or oyster shell grit are both suitable; others are available from poultry suppliers or game bird breeders. Small species such as goldfinches, siskins and redpolls use canary grit.

WATERING TRAY WITH WOODEN FRAME AND HEATING ELEMENT



COPING WITH SQUIRRELS

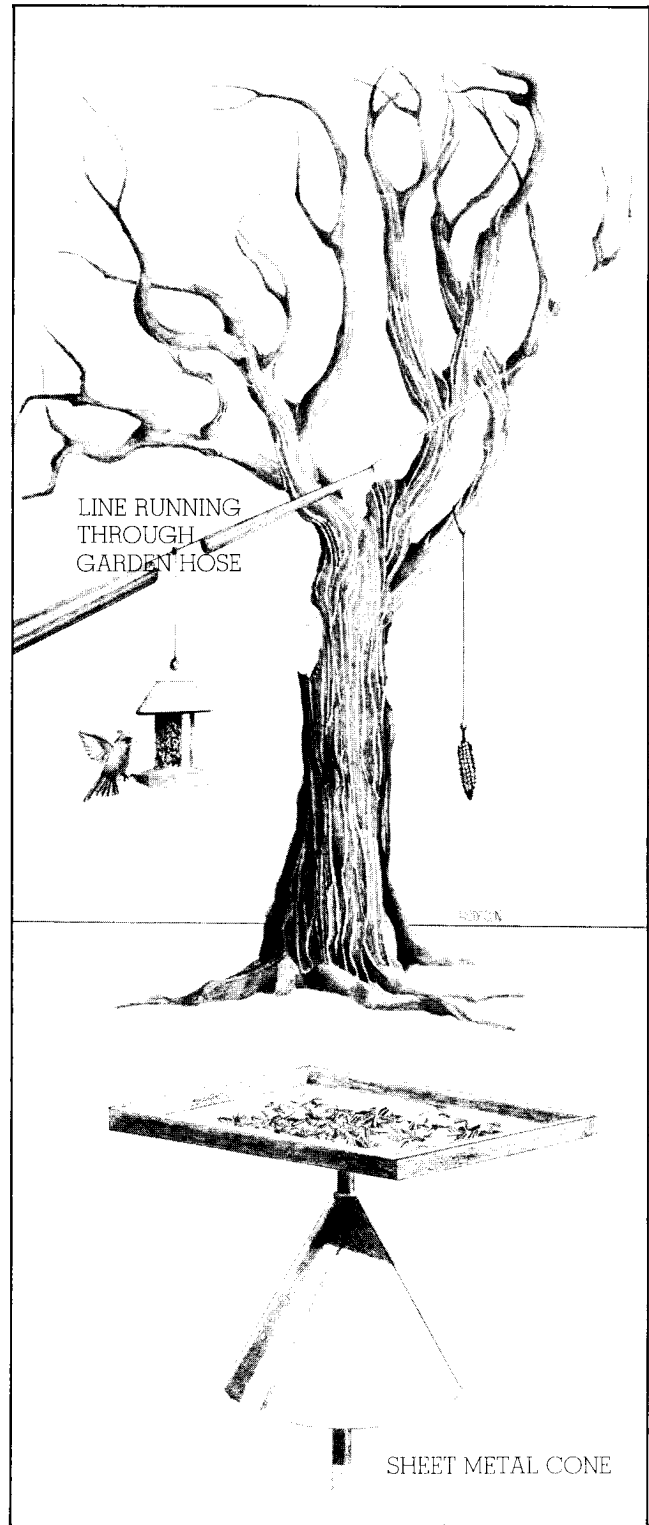
People's attitudes toward squirrels vary tremendously. If you enjoy squirrels, feeding them is easy and they need little encouragement. However, most bird-feeding enthusiasts view them as pests. The most serious offenders are common gray squirrels and sometimes their smaller cousins, red squirrels. Nocturnal visits by a family of flying squirrels are usually viewed much more favorably.

The case against gray squirrels centers on their gluttonous appetites, their interference with birds' feeding, and the damage their gnawing does to wooden or plastic feeders. Squirrels are persistent and acrobatic in their efforts to obtain food intended for feathered guests. There are several approaches to problem squirrels:

REMOVE THEM. Squirrels can be captured in commercial or homemade live traps and removed to a rural area or park at least 5 or 6 miles from home. In Wisconsin, a landowner may hunt squirrels all year on his or her property (except for a brief period just before the gun-deer season).

PREVENT THEIR ACCESS TO FEEDERS. This may not be as easy as it sounds. The acrobatic abilities of a squirrel trying to get into a suspended feeder almost defy imagination. Some techniques that help keep squirrels away from feeders include placing sheet metal sheathing or cones on feeder poles, hanging feeders from thin support cables or from horizontal lines threaded through a 6-foot length of garden hose or tubing, or using "squirrel-proof" feeders. Remember, in your anti-squirrel scheming, that in winter squirrels may be able to jump from snowbanks.

LEARN TO LIVE WITH THEM. If all else fails, provide a feeder for the squirrels away from the bird feeders. Stock it with corn or nuts and hope that this distraction will keep them away from the bird seed. An ear of dried corn attached to a cable and hung from a limb will also keep the squirrels busy. One frustrated person we know drilled holes through several nuts and nailed them to a tree to keep the squirrels busy!

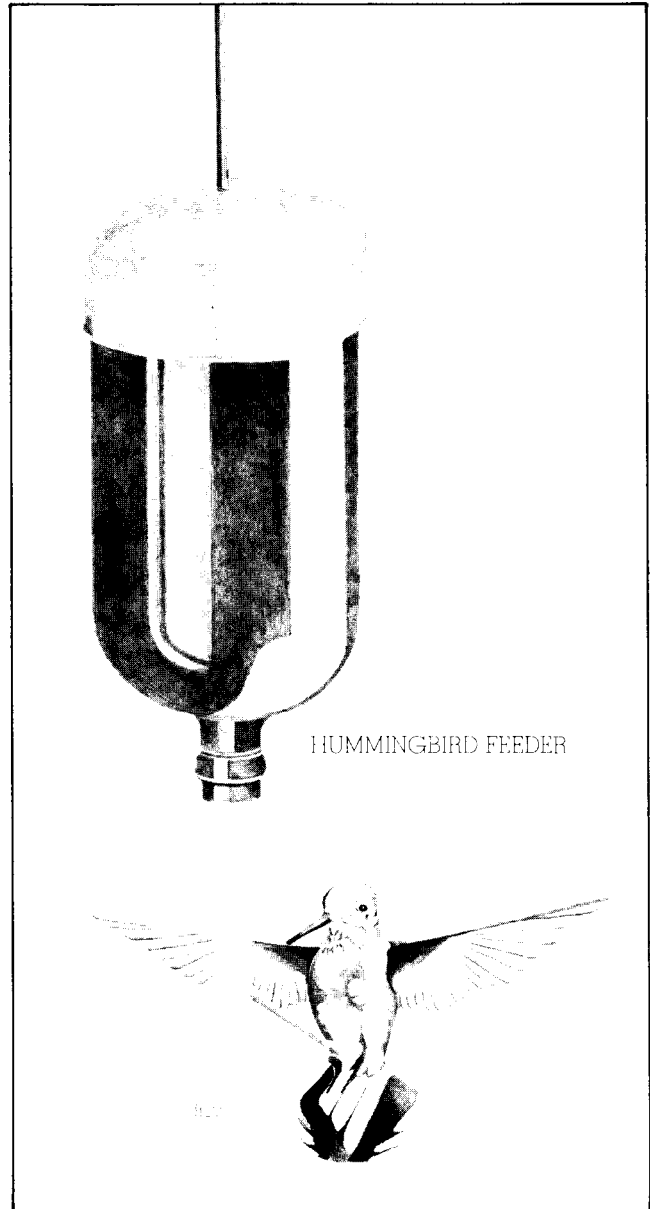


S A N I T A T I O N

It is very important for the health of your feathered guests to keep your feeders clean. If you find dead birds around a feeder, poor sanitation is probably a contributing factor. High concentrations of birds at feeders facilitate the spread of disease, and feeders themselves may become contaminated. An intestinal infection called salmonellosis is spread through fecal droppings. As droppings accumulate, the problem gets worse. Finches and sparrows are especially susceptible to this disease.

It is a good idea to clean out your feeder once a week. Remove moldy seed and fecal droppings. Painted, varnished or metal feeders are easy to clean. To disinfect feeders, dunk them in a weak bleach solution and let them dry before refilling with fresh seed. Remove accumulations of spilled seeds and seed coats from the ground because this material can be the source of fungal diseases.

Disease problems are especially likely to occur if you continue to feed into the summer. Warm weather promotes the survival and growth of many disease organisms. Especially if mourning doves are frequent visitors to your feeders, clean the feeders and do not begin feeding again until fall. Mourning doves are susceptible to a parasitic disease called trichomoniasis, which is easily spread at feeders when contaminated food drops from the mouth of an infected bird. There's really no reason to feed during the summer. Natural foods are abundant then, and the birds can forage for themselves. However, if you wish to continue to attract birds, practice good sanitation. Nesting material such as string can make a feeder doubly attractive in spring or early summer. In Wisconsin, late April, when buds begin to open, is a safe time to discontinue feeding for the summer. Hummingbirds are in a special category, of course. They are present only in summer, and hummingbird feeders are intended for summertime use.



PEST BIRDS

The best way to deal with pigeons, house sparrows, starlings and crows is to avoid feeding the foods they prefer. You can also trap pigeons and sparrows in commercial traps and remove them. Sparrows avoid unstable feeders, so any suspended feeder will discourage them. Crows are frightened by the slightest human activity. Cold weather and snow really bring in the starlings, so during such periods, remove scraps, bread and larger food items from your feeder. You can discourage all these less-desirable species by feeding mainly sunflower seeds. Remember to check state and municipal laws before you consider trapping or using a pellet or BB gun to control pest birds. In Wisconsin, only the pigeon, starling and house sparrows are *not* protected. *All* other species are protected by state or federal law or both.

SOME GENERAL TIPS

—A discarded Christmas tree provides shelter and cover near a feeder if natural cover is in short supply.

—A clasp from a dog leash makes a handy attachment for a hanging feeder—it makes the feeder easy to remove for filling or repair.

—A good field guide or several hours with a “pro” makes bird identification simple and fun.

—You can mark the passing of the seasons by keeping track of the comings and goings of different species.

—A tray or pan mounted beneath the feeder reduces waste by catching a lot of spilled seeds. But always provide some seeds on the ground for doves, pheasants, juncos, towhees, sparrows, blackbirds and other ground-feeding species.

—A poor winter at the feeder—low numbers, few species—is usually a sign of a mild winter or abundant natural food rather than some sort of catastrophe.

—Cardinals, blue jays and house sparrows are often the first visitors to a new feeder. When titmice, woodpeckers and nuthatches begin coming in, you know you have established an effective feeding station.

—Do not be discouraged if it takes time for birds to respond to a new feeder. It makes a big difference whether you live in a new subdivision, barren of trees, or in a heavily wooded acre on the edge of town and whether your neighbors have feeders.

—Suet-seed mixes can be purchased in cakes, blocks, chunks and other forms. They are more expensive than homemade and not completely edible, but convenient.

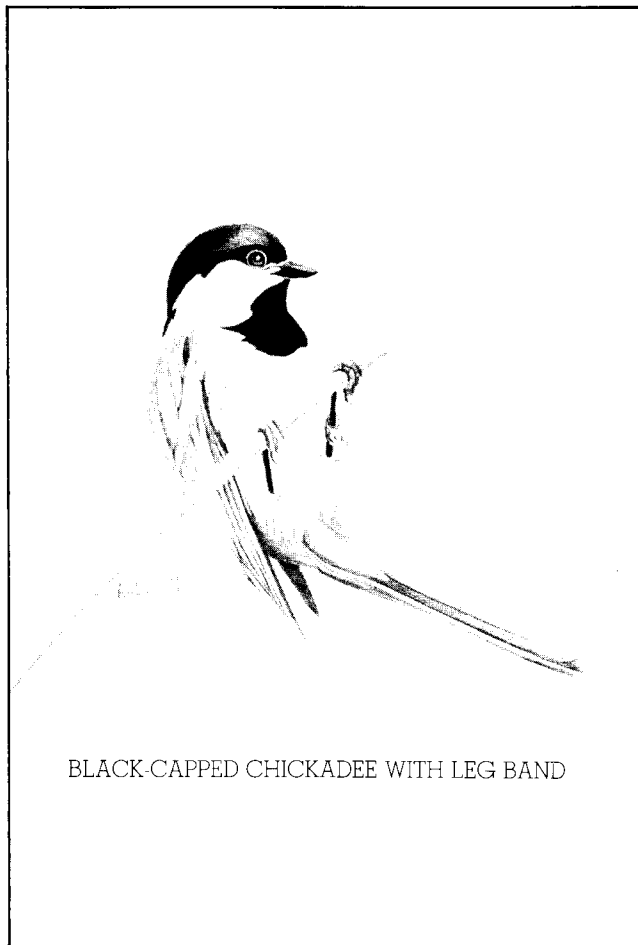
—If you attract a rare bird to your feeder, be discreet about publicizing it. You can easily be overrun with eager birdwatchers.

—If you happen to see a banded bird, try to read the band number and report it to a known bander, a Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources employee or the Bird Banding Laboratory in Washington, D. C., 20811. Banders work hard for the recovery information they get. Banded birds are likely to return to a particular feeder year after year, so you can renew old friendships.

—If you wish to try your hand at homemade feeders or birdhouses, consult University of Wisconsin—Extension publication G2091, *Shelves, Houses and Feeders for Birds and Squirrels*.

We urge you to try bird feeding. If you do, consider it more as a recreational activity or hobby than as a way to manipulate bird populations. If you are mindful of the potential problems discussed in this booklet, both you and the birds will benefit from the activity.

Reference to products in this publication is not intended to be an endorsement to the exclusion of others which may be similar. Persons using such products assume responsibility for their use in accordance with current label directions of the manufacturer.



BLACK-CAPPED CHICKADEE WITH LEG BAND

B I R D F E E D I N G T I P S F O R

Authors: Scott Craven is associate professor of wildlife ecology and Robert L. Ruff is professor of wildlife ecology, College of Agricultural and Life Sciences, University of Wisconsin-Madison, and University of Wisconsin-Extension, Cooperative Extension. Produced by the Department of Agricultural Journalism, University of Wisconsin-Madison.

This publication is available from your Wisconsin county Extension office or from: Agricultural Bulletin, Rm. 245, 30 N. Murray St., Madison, Wisconsin 53715, Phone 608-262-3346. Contact Agricultural Bulletin to determine availability before publicizing.

University of Wisconsin-Extension, Cooperative Extension, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and Wisconsin counties, publishes this information to further the purpose of the May 8 and June 30, 1914 Acts of Congress; and provides equal opportunities in employment and programming including Title IX requirements.

G3176 Bird Feeding: Tips for Beginners and Veterans

RP-08-90-5M-185-S

B E G I N N E R S & V E T E R A N S

