

# Helping Backyard Birds in Winter

Bill Thompson, III



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**BIRD WATCHER'S**  
DIGEST

## It's Great to Help Backyard Birds in Winter!



As bird watchers and bird feeders, there's a great sense of satisfaction that comes from seeing our offerings of food, water, and shelter being eagerly consumed by our backyard birds. I've been feeding birds for more than 40 years, and in that time I've learned a great deal about the subject. Perhaps nothing is more important than keeping the ultimate welfare of the birds in mind as we offer them food, water, and shelter.

Feeders or water features that are covered in droppings, mildew, or other gross things can actually do more harm than good for the birds. They can in fact become sources of disease. We owe it to the birds to do the basic maintenance on our feeders, houses, and bird baths so that they can feed, drink, and shelter in good health. These things aren't hard—but they require a bit of your time and attention.

This e-guide is full of the useful backyard feeding information that took me years to learn. I hope you'll enjoy reading it and will keep it as a handy reference. When bad weather comes, you'll be ready to provide your backyard birds with just the kind of helpful hospitality they are seeking.

And if you want more great content like this, delivered right to your mailbox or email inbox, consider subscribing to one or both of our magazines: *Bird Watcher's Digest* and *Watching Backyard Birds*.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Bill".

Bill Thompson, III  
Publisher

# Top 10 Ways to Help Birds in Bad Weather



Wintertime, and the livin' ain't easy. Birds are hungry, and the snow's piling high.

Birds can survive without our help in the winter. Some ornithologists have even suggested that bird feeding is more beneficial to us (humans) than it is to the birds. Be that as it may, studies have shown that birds with access to bird feeders in winter survive at a higher rate than birds without access to such free food. The difference between the haves and the have-nots is not huge, but it's there. Feeding birds in winter, if done right, is a good thing for the birds (and for us, too).

**10. Make sure seed is accessible and dry.** Hopper or tube feeders are good at protecting seed from wet weather, and they dole out food as it is eaten. Sweep snow off of platform feeders, or clear a place on the ground where you can scatter seed for ground-feeding species such as sparrows, towhees, juncos, and doves. If snow build-up is a problem...

**9. Make a windbreak.** A few winters ago we had a week of dry, blowing snow. The drifts were five feet deep, almost burying the feeders. We couldn't possibly keep the feeders free of snow, so we switched tactics. We made a windbreak using our old Christmas tree, the remains of our brush pile, and two large pieces of plywood. We placed

the tree on its side near the brush pile. We wedged the plywood pieces into the snow and the brush pile to serve as walls that drastically reduced the wind. We cleared the snow from a patch of ground on the sheltered side of this contraption and scattered seed. The birds swarmed to our new, wind-free spot. Which brings me to another good idea...

**8. Keep extra feeders for use in bad weather.** We keep an extra-large-capacity tube feeder in the garage for use when nasty weather comes. It not only gives the birds another place to eat, which means more birds can eat at one time, but it also cuts down on our trips outside for refilling the feeders. Other extras to consider having: peanut feeder, suet feeder, satellite feeder (for the small birds to use), and a hopper feeder.

**7. Scatter seed in sheltered places.** Not all birds will venture to a feeder of any sort, no matter how bad the weather. Some species prefer to skulk in the thickets, brambles, and other secure places. For these species, consider scattering some seed (black-oil sunflower, sunflower bits, peanut bits, mixed seed) under your deck, in your hedges and bushes, or even along the edge of a wooded area. At our farm the eastern towhees, dark-eyed juncos, and Carolina wrens much prefer to feed on food



scattered under our deck. Many of the American tree sparrows and white-throated sparrows appreciate the seed we toss into the raspberry thicket on the edge of our woods.

**6. Offer high-energy foods** such as suet, meat scraps, and peanut butter. Fat gives the biggest energy boost to winter birds, and without enough energy to keep them going, many songbirds would not survive a cold winter night. Suet (the fat removed from processed beef), meat scraps, and peanut butter all provide fat to birds that eat them. If you don't have a suet feeder, use a mesh onion bag. Suspend it from a tree branch or iron feeder hook. To feed peanut butter, drill one-inch holes in a foot-long section of a small log. Insert a screw eye into one end of the log. Smear peanut butter into the holes and suspend the feeder from the screw eye. Or

just smear peanut butter onto the bark of a tree. And, no, peanut butter will not stick to the roof of a bird's bill and choke it to death.

**5. Use a birdbath heater wisely.** A water heater can keep your birdbath open in the coldest weather, which is good and bad. It's good because birds need water to drink when it's cold. If there's snow, birds can use the snow for water. But if there's no snow they may have no access to water. There is some anecdotal evidence that birds will bathe in open water in very cold weather (below 0° F), and the water may freeze on their feathers before it dries. This can be very bad—even fatal—for birds. I suggest you place several large rocks in your bath so there is not enough room for a bird to bathe, but still plenty of places for a thirsty bird to get a drink. When the weather warms up you can remove the

rocks and let the birds get on with their hygiene.

**4. Offer mealworms in a heavy dish or small crock.** I'm a big mealworm fan, although I don't eat them myself. The birds at our house appear for their mealworms every morning, especially in winter. Where else are they going to get live food when the ground is frozen? Use a heavy dish so the wind can't blow the worms or the dish away. We use a small dog dish made of glazed crockery. The worms can't climb its slick sides.

**3. Furnish your bird houses.** Imagine you're a bird roosting in a nest box on a cold winter's night. Wouldn't it be nice to snuggle down into some dried grass or dry wood shavings in the bottom of the house? We usually layer three to four inches of clean, dry meadow grass in the bottom of our bluebird boxes after the last nesting of the summer. Every one of our boxes is used as a roost site in the off-season. Wood shavings work well, too. Don't use sawdust, however; it can retain moisture, which does not help the birds keep warm.

Here's another bird house tip...

**2. Plug the air vent holes in your bird houses with removable weather stripping.** We use the claylike weather stripping that comes in a roll (Moretite is one brand) for this purpose. Good



ventilation is necessary on a scorching summer day, but it's a real liability for birds seeking winter shelter. Think how cozy the birds will be in a well-sealed house.

**1. Be ready for big changes in weather.** If you keep abreast of the weather developments you'll know when bad weather is coming, and you'll be able to stock up on seed, suet, and other goodies. You can also be ready to take on some of the activities listed above. Conversely, when the weather breaks, take advantage by cleaning and disinfecting your feeders (one part bleach to nine parts hot water). Whatever you do, don't let yourself be caught totally unprepared for harsh winter weather. The birds don't *have* to live off of your feeder largess, but it sure helps make the winter livin' a little easier.



# Cozy Winter Housing for Birds

Reprinted from the December 2016  
issue of *Watching Backyard Birds*.

You might be surprised at how many of your bird houses are used as nighttime roosts in winter. Telltale clues are there in the form of droppings, feathers, and bits of food.

If you live in a region with cold winter weather, you can make your nest boxes cozier with a few winterizing tricks. Start by cleaning out the box if it has messy old nesting material in it.

Fashion a new nest cup of clean, dried grasses and place it in the box.

This is a good time to check the water resistance of your nest boxes. If the sides or top are weathered or cracked they may absorb rather than shed water. If the wood is too far gone, it's time to replace the house.

Otherwise, a coating of all-weather wood stain or light-colored latex paint will help keep the winter dampness out. Stain or paint on the outside only and try to do it when birds are not likely to use the house.

This is also a good time to check the hardware on your boxes and poles. Wood can shrink as it weathers, and screws and nails can work loose. Are the access doors closing tightly? Is the box securely attached to the pole? Is the baffle still hanging properly?

The final bit of winterizing involves plugging the boxes' vent holes. These holes are vital in summer to keep the nestlings from getting too hot. In winter the holes are just drafty. We plug the vent holes using moldable clay weather stripping. Stuff the weather stripping snugly into the vent holes from the outside. This will help keep the body heat of roosting birds from escaping, and it will keep rain and snow from getting into the box. Cozy winter housing is a small gift you can give to your birds as the cold weather sets in.

BILL THOMPSON, III ©



A female Eastern bluebird flies to the nest box.



Make sure boxes are clean and weather-proofed.



Provide warm, dry nesting material.



# Top 10 Foods for Winter Bird Feeding



Reprinted from the December 2017 issue of *Watching Backyard Birds*

**Downy woodpeckers are regular visitors to suet feeders.**

**W**inter: 'Tis the season for feeding birds all across North America, especially in those regions where it gets mighty cold and snowy. If you are a veteran bird feeder, you've probably gained lots of insight into the foods your backyard birds prefer. Perhaps you've learned through trial and error, or perhaps you did your homework and read up on the subject.

If you are just getting started in bird feeding, or if you are frustrated by a lack of success in attracting winter birds to your feeders, the first thing you need to determine is whether you are feeding the right foods. If you are not giving the birds what they want, you might not have many birds.

The following ten foods are extremely popular with backyard birds all across North America.

### **10. Black-oil sunflower seed.**

This seed is the hamburger of the bird world. Almost any bird that will visit a bird feeder will eat black-oil sunflower. Birds that can't crack the seeds themselves will scour the ground under the feeders, picking up bits and pieces. The outer shell of a black-oil sunflower seed is thinner and easier to crack than that of striped sunflower. Black-oil sunflower kernels have a higher fat content than striped sunflower seeds, and so make a great winter diet staple. Striped sunflower is



**Red-bellied woodpeckers enjoy peanuts, even those in the shell.**

still fine, and evening grosbeaks, cardinals, jays, and other big-billed birds may even prefer it slightly, but black-oil sunflower seed is better at attracting a wide variety of birds to your winter feeder. Hulled sunflower seeds, aka sunflower hearts, provide a no-mess option.

**9. Peanuts.** Shelled (which means without a shell), dry-roasted, and unsalted peanuts provide protein and fat, so they're a great fuel for birds in winter. Several major feeder manufacturers produce sturdy, efficient, tube-shaped feeders intended to serve peanuts. Woodpeckers, jays, nuthatches, chickadees, and titmice will readily visit a feeder for this high-energy food. Even cardinals and finches will eat peanuts. Whole peanuts—in the shell—attract jays and woodpeckers, but not smaller birds. Birds love peanut



**Look for dark-eyed juncos to forage on or near the ground, often under hanging bird feeders.**

butter, too—just avoid brands that contain partially hydrogenated oil, aka trans fat. Be warned, though, that squirrels love peanuts in any form.

**8. Suet.** For birds in winter, fat is an excellent source of energy. Commercial suet blocks are available wherever birdseed is sold. Or look for raw suet in the meat aisle of your grocery store. Ask for it at the butcher counter if you don't see packages of it on display. It is fine to feed small chunks of raw suet to wild birds, but it does become rancid faster than commercial blocks, especially during warm weather. No suet feeder? No problem—just use an old mesh onion bag. For the adventurous, you can render raw suet to make your

own longer-lasting blocks: Melt it down to liquid in a microwave or on the stovetop, monitoring it carefully. Remove and dispose of the unmeltable bits, and allow it to harden.

**7. Good mixed seed.** Is there such a thing as BAD seed mix? You bet! Bad mixed seed has lots of filler in it—junk ingredients that most birds won't eat. Bad mixed seed can include dyed seed intended for pet birds, wheat, and some forms of red milo that only birds in the Desert Southwest seem to eat. Good mixed seed has a large amount of black-oil sunflower seed, cracked corn, white proso millet, and perhaps some peanut chips, sunflower hearts, and dried fruit. You get what you pay for when

it comes to seed mixes. Read the ingredients on the bag, or make your own seed blend from the seeds mentioned above.

6. Nyjer/thistle seed. Although it can be expensive, Nyjer (aka thistle) seed is eagerly consumed by all the small finches—goldfinches, house, purple, and Cassin’s finches, pine siskins, and redpolls. You need to offer this tiny seed in a specialized feeder of some kind. The two most commonly used types of thistle feeder are a tube feeder with small, thistle-seed-sized

holes, and a thistle sock. A thistle sock is a fine-mesh, synthetic bag that is filled with Nyjer seed. Small finches can cling to this bag and pull seeds out through the mesh. Note: Nyjer can go rancid or moldy quickly in wet weather. A sure sign that it has gone off is when the birds stop visiting the feeder. Time to throw away what you’ve got and buy a fresh bag.

5. Safflower. This white, thin-shelled, conical seed is eaten by many birds and has the reputation for being the favorite food

**Below: Safflower seed. Bottom: A high-quality seed mix.**





Cracked corn.



Mealworms.

of the northern cardinal. Some feeder operators claim that safflower seed is not as readily eaten by squirrels and blackbirds.

(Caveat: Your results may vary.) Feed safflower in any feeder that can accommodate sunflower seed. Avoid offering safflower on the ground in wet weather: It can quickly become soggy and inedible. You can buy safflower in bulk at seed and feed stores.

**4. Cracked corn.** Sparrows, blackbirds, jays, doves, quail, and squirrels are just a few of the creatures attracted to cracked corn. Depending on where you live you may also get turkeys, deer, elk, moose, and caribou. Fed in moderation, cracked corn will attract almost any feeder species. Some feeder operators use this food to lure

the squirrels away from the bird feeders. Squirrels love corn—cracked or otherwise—best of all. Whole corn still on the cob is fine for squirrels, but not a good bird food because the kernels are too big and hard for most small birds to digest. Cracked corn is broken into smaller, more manageable bits that many birds will gobble up.

**3. Mealworms.** Most feeder birds, except goldfinches, will eat mealworms if you offer them. Live mealworms are available in bait stores or by mail order. Don't worry, mealworms aren't slimy and gross. In fact, they aren't even worms; they are larval stage of a beetle (*Tenebrio molitor*), if that makes you feel better. We grow our own mealworms in a tub of old-fashioned

rolled oats, and feed them to the birds in a shallow ceramic dish. The dish has slippery sides so the worms can't crawl out. Bluebirds, in particular, go crazy for mealworms and will eat as many as you provide. That can result in an unbalanced diet, so we recommend no more than twenty mealworms per bluebird per day. Bags of freeze-dried mealworms are usually available in wild bird feeding stores and big-box hardware stores.

**2. Fruit.** Humans are supposed to eat at least three servings of fruit every day. Fruit is also an important dietary element for birds, but it can be hard to find in many areas in midwinter. Set out grapes, slices of citrus fruits, apple or banana slices, and even melon rinds, and watch the birds chow down. If you want to feed rai-

sins, chop them up and soak them in warm water first to soften them up a bit. Offering fruit to tanagers and orioles is a traditional spring and summer feeding strategy, but many winter feeder birds will eat fruit, too.

### **1. Homemade bird treats.**

You can come up with your own recipes for winter bird treats. Smear peanut butter on a tree trunk, and poke some peanut bits into it. Melt suet in your microwave, and pour it into an ice-cube tray to harden. Before it solidifies, add peanut bits, raisins, apple bits, or other bird foods. Put the tray in your freezer to harden. Once it does, you've got cubed bird treats—easy to make and easy to use!

**Song sparrow at a commercial bell-shaped suet-and-seed feeder.**



A vertical cylindrical bird feeder is shown against a light blue background. Four American goldfinches are perched on the feeder. Two are at the top, hanging upside down by their tails. One is in the middle, facing the camera. One is at the bottom, also hanging upside down. The feeder is filled with dark brown Nyjer seed.

# Top 10 Winter Bird Feeding Mistakes to Avoid

Reprinted from the  
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yard Birds*

**American goldfinches  
don't mind hanging up-  
side down for Nyjer.**

If you feed the birds in your yard, you probably know that there are some things that work and others that fail miserably. In the spirit of David Letterman's famous Top Ten lists, here are the Top Ten Winter Bird Feeding Mistakes to Avoid.

### **10 Filling Your Tube Feeder with an Inappropriate Seed Mix.**

Many seed mixes are intended primarily for ground-feeding birds, such as towhees and sparrows. Because tube feeders are intended to hang well above the ground, the seed inside should be targeted at bird species that eat above the ground. Some mixes, such as those that contain primarily sunflower safflower seeds and nuts, are fine for a tube feeder, but read the ingredients. There is no point in offering milo, white millet, or cracked corn in a tube feeder.

### **9. Ground Feeding.**

If you pile seed in one spot on the ground, you will create a stinky, messy, unhealthy zone that will be hard to clean up and might attract rodents and other critters you didn't intend to feed. Instead, use a platform feeder close to the ground to please ground-feeding birds.

### **8. Ignoring Feeder Hygiene.**

Even if it's cold outside, dirty feeders can still make birds sick.



A white-breasted nuthatch on suet.

**Solution:** Wash your feeders at least monthly in a 9:1 water to bleach solution. Rinse thoroughly and allow to air dry.

### **7. Buying Cheap Birdseed.**

Read the ingredients in seed mixes. You get what you pay for, and inexpensive bird seed blends contain a lot of filler—seeds that birds don't love, and that don't provide much nutrition. There's a reason cheap birdseed is cheap. If wheat, milo, barley, or unfamiliar seeds are listed as main ingredients, the seeds are no bargain.

### **6. Feeding Old, Stale Seed.**

Birdseed, like any other natural food, ages. Moths, weevils, cobwebs, and clumping are a sure sign that seed is past its expiration date. Another is that birds ignore the seeds you offer.





A platform feeder is the right place to offer mixed birdseed.

Throw it out, wash your feeder, and buy fresh, new seeds. Nyjer, especially, has a short shelf life. If the finches ignore it, even if it looks fine, it's probably gone bad.

### **5. No Feeder Variety.**

Platform feeding is fine, but many birds prefer to use other kinds of feeders. If you're not getting many chickadees, nuthatches, or woodpeckers, try this: Add a hopper, tube, or satellite feeder. You'll soon attract other, smaller songbird species to visit your backyard. A variety of feeders and food types bring a variety of species.

### **4. Believing that No Nyjer Means No Finches.**

Let's face it: Nyjer is expensive, but it is the favorite of goldfinches, siskins, and other

finches. Finches love other seeds, too, though, including black-oil sunflower seeds and sunflower chips. If you can't afford Nyjer, consider offering it as a supplement to your sunflower tube when you can.

### **3. Feeding Birds Stale Bread Products.**

The birds may seem to love your stale bread, but bread to a hungry bird is like popcorn to hungry humans: Filling, but with not much nutritional value. Bread attracts mostly starlings and house sparrows, and few native species such as cardinals, chickadees, and woodpeckers.

### **2. Banishing Squirrels Only with Baffles.**

Baffles can be effective in keeping squirrels off of pole-mounted feeders, but there

are lots of other ways to hang bird feeders—and squirrels often get to them. If you're losing the squirrel wars, try offering dried corn, either cracked or still on the cob, elsewhere in your yard, far from your bird feeding station. Squirrels love corn, and you might distract them from your bird feeders. You might simultaneously learn to enjoy squirrel watching!

### **1. Taking Down Your Feeder So the Birds Will Migrate.**

It is simply not true that your feeders prevent birds from migrating. Birds that migrate know when to leave. Your feeders, no matter how nice and well-stocked they are, will not delay a migrant sparrow, finch, or grosbeak for even one second. It is fine to feed birds all year long.



**Try offering squirrels their very own corn to discourage them from dining at the bird feeders.**

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