

# Feeding wildlife

## Birds

Over the past 50 years, many 'common' birds have dramatically declined. No-one knows for sure the reasons for this, but changing agricultural practices and a lack of food in the summer and winter have taken their toll. Sometimes when we look out of the window into our gardens, it is difficult to believe that song thrushes, sparrows and starlings are all struggling to survive in the countryside, but they are. These among many others are now red listed as species of extreme concern.

Providing food for your garden birds not only aids their ability to survive through hard times but also ensures they are in good condition for the breeding season increasing their chances of successfully hatching and rearing young. It also provides us with a unique opportunity to observe wildlife close up.

### Supplementary feeding

Birds will welcome supplementary food throughout the year particularly between the months of October and April as the availability of natural food sources declines. In winter try to put food out as regularly as possible. If you decide to stop supplementary feeding, please do so gradually as the birds may have become dependant on your supply of food. A wide variety of food types can be fed to birds. Different types of food will attract different species to your garden. Feeding bread should be avoided as it does not have much nutritional content and dry bread can swell up in the bird's stomach.

### Do feed

- ✓ Suitable seed mixtures may include a variety of different seed types including flaked maize, broken peanuts, sunflower seeds (particularly black seeds), nyjer seeds millet, and pinhead oatmeal. These are all rich in the essential fats and proteins and are highly palatable to many different birds.
- ✓ Unsalted peanuts provide an important source of fat for tits and greenfinches.
- ✓ Fresh coconut shells can be hung from bird tables.
- ✓ Apples are particularly popular with thrushes, blackbirds and starlings.
- ✓ Mealworms are popular with robins and insect eating birds.
- ✓ Other kitchen leftovers including cooked, unsalted rice, pastry, potatoes (baked, roasted and mashed), unsalted bacon rind and fat may also be provided.
- ✓ Grated Cheese is popular with robins, wrens and dunnocks.

### Never feed

- ✗ Salted food of any kind including salted peanuts and bacon.
- ✗ Desiccated coconut as it may swell inside birds' stomachs.
- ✗ Large food items (e.g. whole peanuts) during the breeding season (May/June) as they may choke young birds.
- ✗ Margarine or vegetable oils.
- ✗ Mixtures that include dog biscuits, lentils or split peas are not suitable as bird food.
- ✗ Cooked porridge, as it becomes glutinous and can harden around a bird's beak.

Even in the smallest urban garden, planting seed and fruit-bearing plants will attract birds. The varieties you pick will depend on the size of your garden, so the list that follows is just for ideas. However, if you have room, do consider small trees or shrubs – these provide cover for birds roosting overnight and you may be lucky enough to have them nesting.

Barberry *Berberis vulgaris*  
Bramble *Rubus fruticosus*  
Dog Rose *Rosa canina*  
Dogwood *Cornus sanguinea*  
Evening primrose *Oenothera biennis*  
Hazel *Corylus avellana*  
Honeysuckle *Lonicera periclymenum*  
Holly *Ilex aquifolium*  
Ivy *Hedera helix*  
Privet *Ligustrum vulgare*  
Sunflower *Helianthus spp*  
Teasel *Dipsacus fullonum*

### Feeders

Feeders hung from tree branches and bird tables can be used for seed mixtures and peanuts. If you have problems with squirrels and larger aggressive birds buy feeders that have been designed to allow only smaller birds access to the food. Never put out any food in mesh bags, although peanuts and fat balls are often sold this way. Birds' feet can be trapped in the mesh, causing terrible injuries. Birds with a barbed tongue, e.g. woodpeckers, can become trapped by their beaks. Always put peanuts and fat balls in a metal mesh feeder.

### Bird tables

Place your bird table out in the open, in a quiet spot and away from cover where predators such as cats can lurk. A small bush about 2m away will be used by small birds, who like to perch in safety before flying out to grab a morsel then dash back to cover.

Birds that congregate together when feeding are more prone to catching certain diseases e.g. salmonella. To prevent this occurring clean your bird table regularly and put out only enough food for one day at a time (see 'hygiene' overleaf). Bird tables should be as big as possible, so plenty of birds can feed at the same time.

If you are building your own, a simple tray will do, with a 1cm high rim around the edges which will stop food blowing off, and a gap at each corner will allow rain to drain off and facilitate cleaning.

### Ground feeding

Food can also be placed on the ground to allow ground-feeding birds such as thrushes, dunnocks and pigeons to feed. Where necessary, break food into small pieces to prevent larger birds dominating. Food should be scattered widely to allow all birds to feed without competition. Do not leave large amounts of food on the ground overnight as this may attract rats.

### Other ideas

Fill the holes and cracks of a post or suspended log with fatty food, such as suet for agile birds such as tits, nuthatches, woodpeckers, treecreepers and even wrens.

## Providing water

Birds and other animals will also welcome a supply of water for drinking, bathing and preening especially when local supplies have frozen or dried up.

A shallow dish, preferably with sloping sides and a slip free bottom filled with water can be provided.

It is important to keep baths clean by washing sides and removing algae, dead leaves and droppings regularly.

If the bath freezes, melt ice using hot water only. Never use antifreeze, salt or chemicals.

If you have a pond, make sure there are shallow edges to allow birds and other animals safe access to the water.

## Hygiene

When many birds are in close contact, such as around a feeder, infections can be passed between individuals.

Droppings can also be a source of infection. Good hygiene is important to safeguard the health of you and your birds. This is especially important in summer, when warm weather can make food go off quicker, and harmful bacteria multiply faster.

- Don't put out more food than is taken in a couple of days. If uneaten food accumulates, clear it away. Remove anything which is mouldy or contaminated by droppings.
- Wash your bird table and feeders regularly, using a mild disinfectant and rinse thoroughly.
- If your feeding station is on a hard surface, sweep and wash it every few weeks. If not, move the feeding station every month to prevent droppings accumulating underneath.
- When ground feeding, put food out early in the day, and never put out more than will be eaten during the day. Uneaten food can attract rats.
- Rinse out water containers daily, especially during the warmer months.
- Personal hygiene is important. Always wash your hands after filling bird feeders, and use gloves and separate utensils for cleaning feeders.

## Mammals

To encourage mammals in your wildlife garden, put out some food - peanuts or a bit of tinned dog food. If you'd like to try to identify your nocturnal visitors, put a thick layer of sand by the feeding station so that the animals leave their footprints behind. You can get guides on animal tracks that will help you to identify who your visitor is.

### Small mammals

Mice and voles tend to be more active at night although voles and shrews will search for food in sheltered areas, such as hedgerow bottoms, during the day. A garden feeding station however, is more likely to be used at night.

- An old tray or board can be used as the feeding area and should be placed where there is cover nearby such as a hedgerow.
- A layer of moss, turf or leaves will help the station blend in and a wire frame will protect the small mammals from predators such as cats.
- Shrews are largely insectivorous and need to feed every 2-3 hours day and night. Tinned cat food can be put out for them but in fact food supplies for shrews are normally plentiful during the winter.
- A vole's natural diet consists of seeds, berries, nuts, fruit, green plants and fungi. Food for voles on the feeding station can include porridge oats and muesli or similar.

### Feeding hedgehogs

Hedgehogs like a varied diet. They are loved by gardeners for eating slugs, but they will also eat snails, earthworms, beetles, spiders, caterpillars, millipedes and woodlice. Occasionally they will eat birds eggs and carrion.

- If you put out food regularly hedgehogs will learn when to come and feed.
- Suitable foods are canned dog or cat food, fresh meat, fallen fruit or cereal. You can also buy special hedgehog food. Don't put out too much food – you want your hedgehog to have room left for a few slugs!
- Don't give hedgehogs bread and milk, they cannot digest cows milk and it will give them a nasty stomach upset.
- A source of fresh water is important, especially in hot weather.

### Find out more...

**Bird food and feeders** are available to buy from the Lincolnshire Wildlife Trust visitor centres at Far Ings (Barton) and Gibraltar Point (Skegness), from Lapwing Gifts in Castle Square, Lincoln and from the Trust Headquarters in Horncastle.

**Vine House Farm**, in Deeping St Nicholas, sell bird food via mail order. The website also has lots of information on how and what to feed birds, hygiene and feeding other wildlife. [www.vinehousefarm.co.uk](http://www.vinehousefarm.co.uk).

### Wild About Gardens

Joint project with the RHS and The Wildlife Trusts. Website has lots of advice and factsheets: [www.wildaboutgardens.org](http://www.wildaboutgardens.org).

**The Wildlife Trusts** : [www.wildlifetrusts.org/wildlifegardening](http://www.wildlifetrusts.org/wildlifegardening).

**British Hedgehog Preservation Society** : [www.britishhedgehogs.org.uk](http://www.britishhedgehogs.org.uk)

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