

## To Feed or Not to Feed? A Bird Lover's Dilemma

Written by Janice Mulherin, Pemi-Baker Land Trust

This morning, like many mornings, I sat in my chair by the front window watching the birds in the feeders. It was bitter cold, and I was congratulating myself on giving the birds a little help this winter day. But then I wondered if I am really helping them. Am I feeding the birds for myself or for them? Plus, given that we are in the middle of a serious avian influenza outbreak that is decimating poultry flocks nationwide, should I consider taking down my feeders?

In general, it's bad practice to feed wild animals. That's because teaching wild animals to associate humans with food can lead to problems. Think: "bad" bears at campsites. And the danger is not just to humans. Supplemental feeding can cause digestive problems for some animals (deer and rabbits, for example) and alter normal behaviors. Bird feeders can also attract nuisance wildlife. Squirrels, chipmunks, mice, rats, raccoons, and bears are all liable to consume bird feed and damage feeders

However, feeding birds is a wonderful way to learn about them and connect with the natural world. And, while most wild birds do just fine without it, in the winter months when natural food is scarce, a little extra is helpful, particularly if it is high quality and nutritious. The food supplied at bird feeders is only a supplement; we are simply making survival a little easier for them.

The good news is that avian influenza so far has not infected the songbirds that come to feeders. According to Cornell University, to date only wild aquatic birds are infected and spilling over into our poultry farms. In most cases, putting out feeders is unlikely to present a risk either to songbirds or to us. However, it is recommended that people who raise chickens take in their wild bird feeders. And if we find a dead wild bird of any kind, we should avoid touching it directly.

In terms of having the greatest impact, the most critical time to feed birds is in the wintertime, especially late in the season. By the end of winter many natural food sources are exhausted or else unavailable, deeply buried in the snow. To avoid problems with bears, the NH Fish and Game recommends putting bird feeders out from December 1 to April 1, though recently I've taken my feeders down mid March.

There are a few risks associated with feeding birds including disease, predation and collision. Drawing birds into close contact on shared surfaces makes it easy for them to spread bacteria like salmonella and E. coli, but research shows that frequent cleaning and sanitizing with mild bleach reduces the spread of infection. In fact, the Cornell University Ornithology Lab recommends doing this bi-weekly or even more often when traffic at bird feeders is high. Also, luring birds to the same place on a predictable schedule makes them more vulnerable to predators, like cats and hawks and finally there's collision with windows.

If you decide to feed wild birds and are willing to deal with the risks it presents to them, here's a few tips from the NH Audubon Society:

- 1) Locate bird feeders at different levels
- 2) Offer a variety of seeds in separate feeders
- 3) Provide suet during cool weather only
- 4) Mix peanut butter and corn meal
- 5) Provide fruit for berry-eating birds
- 6) Provide nectar for hummingbirds
- 7) Store seed in secure metal containers
- 8) Discourage squirrels from consuming feeder foods
- 9) Locate feeders to reduce window collisions
- 10) Keep cats indoors
- 11) Clean feeders and rake up spilled grain and hulls

This evening, refilling the feeders I couldn't help but smile as the chickadees flitted from the tree branches to the feeders singing their cheery song. The joy it gives me is well worth it. There is a lot of information on how to make feeding the birds a safe and rewarding experience. Check out these sites to learn more. "Feeding Wild Birds Can Carry Risks; Here's How to Minimize Unintended Harm" (PBS) "Winter Bird Feeding: Good or Bad for Birds?" (Cool Green Science) UNH Cooperative Extension: Winter Bird Feeding fact sheet <https://nhaudubon.org/bird-feeding-basics/> <https://pleasanthill.wbu.com/news-avian-flu>