



Bird Feeder Styles

February is National Wild Bird Feeding Month according to the National Bird-Feeding Society. Many people recognize this month as being hard on the wildlife. It is cold and the food and water sources are often covered with snow. Although most birds get most of their food from natural sources, some small birds like chickadees are helped through the winter by having extra, easy to reach source of food.

The typical Junco or House Finch weighs less than two nickels and may lose twenty percent of its body weight overnight just trying to stay warm. Keep the bird feeder full so they have a dependable source of extra food. Keep the feeder free of snow and ice and stomp on the snow under the feeder so the birds that feed there can find the food.

Although most people want cardinals to come to their feeders, many other birds also come. According to the Cornell University volunteer program Project Feeder Watch, the top ten birds coming to seed feeders, from highest quantity to lowest are: Dark-eyed Junco, House Finch, American Goldfinch, Downy Woodpecker, Blue Jay, Mourning Dove, Black-capped Chickadee, House Sparrow, Northern Cardinal and the Starling.

I am a bit surprised by the Downy Woodpecker being so high on the list and the House Sparrow and Starling being so low. I have many more sparrows and starlings than woodpeckers at my feeders. I think that more of the volunteers must be in wooded areas and not in open suburban areas.

Most of these seed eating birds prefer sunflower seeds that can be fed in several styles of feeder. The plastic or wooden hopper is the most common type of feeder. It has a large bottom tray and a covered storage area above. There may be more than one perch along the sides of the tray so that different sizes of birds can feed on it. A wire mesh bottom is preferred since it keeps rain from getting the stored seeds wet and moldy. A pyramid shaped bottom forces all of the seed out so that none gets stale. Wooden ones should be made from one inch wood (cedar lasts longer than pine) and it should be screwed together not stapled.

Plastic ones usually do not last very long, but acrylic ones often have long warranties. They can be cleaned in the dish washer while wooden ones can not. It is a good idea to clean all feeders several times a season with one part bleach and nine parts water.

Some metal hoppers have weighted doors that close when heavy birds or squirrels land on them. These feeders hold lots of seed and can be adjusted to only feed birds cardinal sized and smaller.

Hopper type feeders are typically used three to fifteen feet off the ground. The higher ones are pulled into place with ropes and pulleys or are attached to second floor deck or apartment railings. Most are hung on a pole so that they can be easily seen from a window. Most of the 'good' birds that people want to see will feed in this height range.

A platform feeder is a hopper without the storage area. They are often used near the ground on short legs. Some platform feeders have a roof and open sides and are called fly-through feeders. The roof helps keep snow and rain off the seed. These feeders are useful in keeping an area clean while attracting birds that feed low to the ground. Juncos, buntings, native sparrows and mourning doves all prefer large open areas to feed and do not usually feed on hoppers several feet off the ground. A screen bottom is especially important for these feeders so that the rain will go through.

Ground feeding birds can be fed by simply spreading seed on the ground, but it is easier to keep the shells and bird droppings cleaned up if the seeds are put on a board or concrete area. The area can then be swept and washed on a regular basis.

Tubed shaped feeders differ mainly in the type of material they are made from. Inexpensive plastic feeders can be a great way to get started in bird feeding. Heavy polycarbonate and acrylic feeders with metal reinforced tops, bottoms and port holes often have life time warranties. Each manufacturer makes their own way of attaching the feeder to a pole and their own seed tray for the bottom of the feeder. The seed tray helps collect spilling seeds, but may become a seat for squirrels. Many tube feeders have short perches to keep large blackbirds off.

All of the above feeders can be used with a straight seed like sunflower or safflower. They can feed mixes of different sized seed as well. The tube feeder known as a finch feeder has very small port holes and is designed to feed niger (Nyjer as it is now trademarked) seed and some small seeded finch mixes.

Nyjer seed is a quarter the size of a grain of rice. The finch feeder port hole is small and the seeds often clog up behind the hole. The bird can not stick it's beak in the hole to undo the clog like it can if the other seeds clog up in the other larger holed feeders. Newer finch feeders use a small screen over a larger hole so that the seeds are more available and log jams collapse on their own.

Suet is the fat from the area around the kidneys of cows and believe it or not, it is a favorite bird food. Birds from woodpeckers to cardinals to robins will all eat the fat on dead animals found in the wild or along roads and from a suet feeder if they have access to it. Because starlings are big gluttons and come to your yard in large flocks, they can eat a whole suet cake in one day. To prevent them from getting any suet it can be hung horizontally in a basket with the suet tray or feeder lid covering the top. The 'good' birds like chickadees, nuthatches and woodpeckers can all hang upside down to get the suet. Any spreadable fat left over from the kitchen can be used for bird feeding. Wide flat holes can be bored into a board and the fat or peanut butter spread on it. Peanut butter can even be spread on the cracks on a tree trunk.

