



About That Bird Feeder...

Birds are beautiful and observing them is a wonderful way to connect with nature. One way some people get to know their backyard bird visitors is by putting out bird feeders and watching who comes to visit. Learn more about how the impact of bird feeders on our local environment is complex.

Good things:

Bird feeders will bring more birds to your backyard or window. It helps us humans watch and learn more about our feathered friends. More birds means we can enjoy more bird songs and see different kinds of birds up close.

Challenging things:

Bird seed feeds all kinds of animals, like squirrels and chipmunks. They are very clever, and your bird feeder can quickly become a squirrel feeder.

Cats and predatory birds (like hawks and other raptors) can learn where a bird feeder is, and use it as a hunting spot. This could put vulnerable birds in danger.

Bird feeders are sometimes hung very close to windows. Since windows are often invisible to birds, they can fly into them, and often not survive.



Birds get used to always having that food available, and can change their normal patterns to visit the bird feeder. Some people worry that by regularly feeding birds, the birds will come to depend on the bird feeder to survive. Scientists think this is not likely, and the birds at your bird feeder will usually still search for other food sources.

Bird feeders can become a place where birds spread bacteria and become sick. In February 2021, wildlife experts asked people to take down their bird feeders to slow the spread of salmonella among pine siskins and other birds. Removing bird feeders when asked can help keep our bird friends healthy and safe.



Bird feeders are a responsibility

If you want to keep a bird feeder, here are some ways to do it safely.

- » **Reduce window collisions:** Hang your feeder away from a window; or, install screens outside your windows, tape patterns, or paint the outside of your window to alert birds to the invisible barrier.
- » **Choose your bird feeder with care:** Like a pet food bowl, non-porous materials like metal, ceramic, and plastic can keep bacteria from growing. Wood can harbor bacteria and cause birds to get sick.
- » **Clean feeders a few times a year:** Old seed can become wet, and grow deadly mold. Clean your bird feeder at least once a season. You can use a brush, then scrub with dish detergent, and rinse until all soap is completely gone.
- » **Choose your food carefully:** Learn about what specific bird species you want to feed, and what healthy, fresh food options are. Nut butters and many other foods we feed birds can be full of sugar and harm them in the long run.
- » **Keep cats indoors:** Or, put your cat on a leash when outside. Cats are great hunters, and outdoor cats can be very dangerous to local birds. A “catero,” or enclosed outdoor “cat patio,” is another way for your cat to be outside safely.

Caring for our bird neighbors

There are lots of ways to help birds survive and thrive on our shared planet without installing a bird feeder:

- » You can **fill your gardens and window boxes with native plants**; local birds will love eating their seeds and hiding in their leaves and branches.
- » Choose to **provide water** instead of a bird feeder: Flowing water will stay fresh and prevent mosquitoes from hatching there.
- » **Install a bug hotel** or leave a leaf pile on the ground for insects to live in. Many birds depend on insects to feed themselves and their babies.
- » Best of all, you can **advocate for and improve open natural spaces**. The best thing we can do for our bird friends is to protect and improve our shared ecosystem so they have plenty of places to find healthy food on their own.

There are lots of great resources you can explore, like the [Audubon Society](#), the [American Bird Conservancy](#), and the [American Birding Association](#). You can also check out your local nature center. Happy birding!