

A Bluebirder's and Martin Enthusiast's Guide to Birdfeeding

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The backyard feeding of songbirds continues to be one of North America's most popular recreational activities. Bird feeding is second only to gardening as a household hobby. If you feed birds, you are in good company. A 1991 report from the *U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service* estimates that 63 million Americans provide food for wild birds, spending more than \$2.5 billion on birdseed and bird feeding supplies each year.

Some of us will become somewhat more sophisticated in our bird feeding, but most of us are content merely to buy the commercial bird food mix at the local feed store, supermarket, discount drug store, retail discount store or other outlet, put it into a suitable feeder and stand by the kitchen sink waiting for the action. And there's usually plenty of that, and much of that action comes from *Passer domesticus* — the House Sparrow whose gluttonous appetite brings him almost instantly to area bird feeders. His omnipresence and aggressive behavior drive other, more desirable, birds away and he "sucks up" more than his share of the food offered.

Millions of well-intentioned people feed these voracious pests along with such winter feeder "stars" as the cardinal, Tufted Titmouse, chickadee, nuthatch, Blue Jay, goldfinch, redpoll, Pine Siskin, junco, Evening Grosbeak, American Tree Sparrow, White-crowned Sparrow, White-throated Sparrow and a wide variety of woodpecker species. In the process, we are unwittingly helping the House Sparrow to survive the rigors of the northern winter. Even more, we are giving these sparrows the diet they need to enter into the spring breeding season in peak physical condition. This, then, puts them into top form as they begin to compete with bluebirds [and Purple Martins] for available nest boxes, and all of the marauding behavior associated with it.

But this does not need to happen. Here are some time-tested techniques which, if employed, will not eliminate House Sparrows at winter feeding stations, but are GUARANTEED to dramatically reduce their numbers at these locations. All of this, plus increasing the number of desirable species coming to the avian feast.

FEEDER THUMBS DOWN:

- Avoid feeding the standard commercial bird food mix containing cracked corn, millet, milo, mixed grains, peanut hearts, proso, safflower, sunflower, sunflower hearts, thistle seed, and wheat. Feed no cracked corn or scratch feed.
- Don't feed barnyard grains (wheat, oats or ground feed grains).
- Offering peanut butter/cornmeal "puddings" (with or without melted suet) packed into knotholes or holes drilled into "feeder logs" will attract woodpeckers, chickadees and others, but they are also extremely attractive to European Starlings.
- Don't stake up "used" Christmas trees as a windbreak around your feeding area (no matter what the conservationist/recyclers say). The trees will, inevitably, be used by the sparrow as a communal roost site. There's no point in giving them bed and breakfast at your place.

FEEDER THUMBS UP:

- Feed ONLY black oil sunflower seed — to which most overwintering bird species are attracted AND:

- Feed niger/thistle seed, which is especially attractive to finch species. These seeds are not of interest to House Sparrows.
- Offer fresh suet in mesh bags or in specially-designed feeders. This food is very important to woodpeckers, chickadees, and many other species. It is only occasionally of interest to starlings, and never of any significant attraction to sparrow pests.
- Feed ear corn tied to tree branches and spiked on mounting boards for Blue Jays and cardinals.
- Feed pressed seed bells/cakes which hang from tree or shrub branches for Tree Sparrows and finches. House Sparrows seem not inclined to feed directly on the pressed seed forms.
- Feed plain cornmeal on a wooden platform elevated about 4-6" above the snow, when the DEEP SNOWS come. While House Sparrows have no apparent interest in the cornmeal, the other (desirable) sparrows and juncos LOVE it; try feeding a light sprinkling of soybean screenings (weed seeds) on this same kind of platform. They are relished by all of the non-House sparrows. Screenings are available from all grain elevators during the fall harvest season.
- Use only hanging or pole-mounted feeders and DO NOT throw birdseed directly on the ground. House Sparrows are ground feeders. They will get the gleanings spilled from the elevated feeders anyway, so don't exaggerate your problem by putting the food right where they want it.
- Take the perches off your feeders. The desirable birds (chickadee, nuthatch, titmouse, finches, etc.) can cling to the feeders without a perch. House Sparrows have difficulty with this.
- Plant an ornamental crab apple or hawthorne nearby as these make attractive focal points for a bird feeding area. These trees also tend to keep their fruits throughout the winter months making them valuable food sources for bluebirds, robins, Cedar Waxwings, Blue Jays and other species.
- Try to add new food or refill your feeders from mid-morning to mid-afternoon so that birds can feed without interruption during the early dawn and until dusk. In extremely cold weather, the ability to gain food early and feed late may make a "life or death" difference to many species of birds.
- Choose a feeding station site that is out of the wind on the leeward side of your house or building where you feed. This will give you your best results. A sunny, sheltered area with small deciduous trees and shrubs nearby is the preferred location. An overabundance of conifers leads to the same communal sparrow roost problem as discussed in relation to the placement of Christmas trees at feeders.

As in most matters, "experience is the best teacher." And our experience of feeding birds in a variety of locations for over 50 years has taught us lots of lessons. Out of this has come these suggestions that should be useful to all winter bird feeders, but especially to the bluebirders [and martin landlords] who are so acutely aware of the devastation caused by our common adversary, the House Sparrow.

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