



Feeding garden birds

For many years people have fed birds in their gardens simply for their own enjoyment; however there is more to it than that. The large scale habitat loss in the countryside, due to development and agriculture, has caused habitat fragmentation and left birds with fewer places to live and find the food they need.

They are often restricted to hedgerows, nature reserves and gardens, meaning our private gardens are now very important for birds. Therefore managing your garden is important and if you provide both natural and supplementary food, your garden will be visited year-round by a host of different birds!

When should I feed?

There is a common perception that winter is the only time to feed birds, once autumn fruits have past and insects are no longer around. However, limiting food provision to just winter can cause more harm than good, and many believe that stopping as soon as the weather picks up increases stress to birds at a time when they are already under pressure from building nests and finding mates.

There are two solutions to this, one is that you should gradually stop giving food after winter as more natural foods becomes available and the other is that because food shortages can occur at any time of the year if you feed the birds all year round you give them a better chance to survive periods of shortage. In reality they need our help all year round as in winter food is naturally scarce, in spring adults are trying to raise chicks, in summer birds use a lot of energy moulting, and in autumn they are storing up fat reserves for the winter.

What sort of food should I use?

- **Nuts and seeds** - take a look at our birdfeed provider Vine House Farm who provide a large range of high quality bird feeds and donate 5% of their profits to Yorkshire Wildlife Trust! Visit www.vinehousefarm.co.uk/our-shop or purchase at Potteric Carr Nature Reserve.
- **Peanuts** - whilst they are a great source of food containing a high fat content for many birds, they should never be put out whole (unless in a wire mesh container), so make sure always to crush them and avoid entirely during breeding season. Also avoid salted and roasted peanuts as these don't do birds any good.
- **Rice and cereals** - cooked rice is beneficial and readily accepted by all species during severe winter weather.
- **Fresh fruit** - apples and pears cut in half and put on a table or the ground are excellent for many species of garden birds especially thrushes like blackbirds and fieldfares. Bananas and grapes are also good.
- **Mealworms** - these are a natural food that many birds will relish throughout the year. It is very important that any mealworms fed to birds are fresh. Dead or discoloured mealworms should be avoided.
- **Soaked bread** - it needs to be soaked because dry bread



Goldfinches - Credit Joanna Richards



swells in the stomach and can harm the birds. Bread should also be avoided during breeding season.

- **Fat balls and food bars** - never put out any food in mesh bags, birds can become entangled. These should also be avoided in the summer months when they are likely to rot quickly.
- **Dried fruit** - raisins and sultanas are popular.
- **Grated cheese** - cheese has a high fat content which is especially good for birds in winter.

Things to avoid

- **Salt** - this is very bad for birds, so beware of putting out any food which has been salted.
- **Dog and cat food** - tinned meats are often very popular with birds, but will also attract cats which threaten garden birds and larger birds including crows.
- **Mouldy and stale food** - although many moulds are harmless, some can cause respiratory infections in birds.
- **Milk** - birds digestive system is not designed to digest milk, so ingesting it can result in serious stomach upsets or death in some cases.
- **Cooking fats** - these often have a high salt content and are also prone to smearing on feathers reducing their waterproofing ability.



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What type of feeders are available?

- **Bird tables** are suitable for many species and most foods, those with a simple tray are perfectly adequate. Just ensure it has a raised rim to ensure food does not get blown away and gaps in the corners of the rim to allow rainwater drainage. Be aware that you need to be able to clean these regularly!
- **Seed feeders** are tubular transparent containers with holes, through which birds are able to access seed.
- **Nut feeders** are made of steel mesh and are the only safe method of offering nuts to wild birds. The mesh size needs to be about 6 mms so that birds can remove the nuts without damaging their beaks.
- **Suet feeders** are plastic coated wire holders designed to hold fat balls or suet blocks. They can also be used for soaked bread.

Things to note

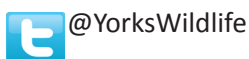
Site feeders close to trees or bushes, so that birds can dash to cover if required; but not close enough that a cat or predator can pounce on them from the tree.

Remember not to overfeed as a surplus of food can attract unwanted visitors such as rats. By supplementing the diets of birds you are essentially creating a falsely high population in your garden, therefore if you suddenly stop there could be life-threatening consequences for them. If you really want to help then plant the right trees and shrubs in your garden as well as putting out food and birds will have supplies throughout the year!

Find out more

If you are not a member then find out more about Yorkshire Wildlife Trust and or to become a member, plus more about the work we do for garden birds by contacting us in the following ways:

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