

December 31, 2024

### Helping Our Feathered Friends Brave the Winter

One of my favorite winter amusements, is pulling a chair up to the back door and gazing out at my busy bird feeders. They are always awash with activity, as chickadees, woodpeckers, and nut hatches swoop in and out in a feathery feeding frenzy. While all of this is pure entertainment and a visual delight to the casual human observer, to the birds, it is a life-or-death endeavor. Simply put, they are packing on carbohydrates and calories to meet the metabolic demand needed to survive the oppressive winter months. Food scarcity and cold temperatures can be a lethal combination for small songbirds. Putting out winter feeders, providing fresh water, and giving them a place to shelter, are all excellent practices to help ensure our feathered friends keep flying and singing until spring.



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For most of us, putting out feeders is a purely selfish act, where-by we gain pleasure from observing the birds who frequent them. However, understanding how important they can be in keeping birds alive will hopefully make us more philanthropic in our backyard birding pursuits. It is vital to remember that feeders are only as beneficial as the food we provide, and getting this part right is most important. Birds need high-energy, calorie-rich foods in the winter. Some options that fit this bill are black-oil sunflower seeds, dried fruits such as raisins or cranberries, mealworms, and suet cakes. Providing a combination of these foods is ideal, as different birds prefer slightly different meals. My personal favorites are black-oil sunflower seeds and high energy, nut filled suet cakes. Both of these are readily available at most farm and grocery stores.

Be careful when buying big bags of cheap bird feed at your local grocery store. Many of these mixes are full of fillers, such as milo, wheat, corn, and canary grass seed. These are all poor food options and provide little to no nutrition. Many times, the birds will pick through cheap mixes and discard the filler seeds on the ground. I've seen many a great milo crop growing underneath bird feeders in the spring. Don't waste your money on bad seed, spend the extra five bucks and get a bag of black-oil sunflower seeds. If you are a wealthy birder, spend the extra \$15 and get black-oil sunflower hearts. These will save the birds a few extra calories that it would otherwise take to crack open a full sunflower seed.

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Keeping feeders properly sanitized is a commonly overlooked practice, but an essential one. Sanitation is of particular importance during the winter, when feeders are visited more frequently. Doing so will help to minimize the spread of avian related diseases, prevent mold growth which results in spoiled seed, and help to discourage rodents who feast on seed residue in and around feeders. During winter, cleaning every two weeks is recommended. To do the job properly, be sure to empty the feeders of any remaining seed or residue and then give them a good scrub with hot soapy water. Follow this with a good soak in a one-part bleach to nine parts water solution for 15 minutes to kill any remaining bacteria or viruses. After the bleach bath, thoroughly rinse the feeder and allow it to air dry completely. Rinsing is very important to ensure any soap or bleach residue is eliminated.

Keeping birds well-fed is great, but there are other important things we can do to improve winter survivability. One of which is providing clean, fresh water for hydration and bathing. Keeping a birdbath near your feeders is always a good idea. We must ensure that water remains unfrozen and this can be accomplished with bubblers and small water heaters. Both of these items can be purchased on the cheap at everyone's favorite online shopping outlet. There are also bird bath options that contain these features built-in, but they are not for the budget birder. Keeping the bird bath clean is also vital for all the same reasons we clean our feeders. Giving them a good scrub down every few days will prevent disease and reduce algae growth.

Providing shelter is also an excellent practice that can benefit birds during the winter. This can be done by using nesting or roosting boxes. These will provide birds a space of refuge during the bitter cold days, allowing them to conserve precious energy. Additionally, nesting boxes can help shield birds from predators, such as your neighbor's gluttonous cat(s). Using natural, untreated and unpainted wood boxes are best. Wood is an excellent insulator and is also breathable. Avoid using boxes made of metal or plastic. Both of which are poor insulators and can easily become too cold or too hot based on the ambient temperature. Boxes can be further insulated by placing dry grass, pine needles, or wood shaving in the bottom. Providing a roost perch using dowels inside the box will allow it to accommodate more birds.

Boxes should be mounted at least five feet from ground level to help prevent predation. Placing the entrance facing away from prevailing winds is also important, typically in a south to southeast direction. Mounting them in a sheltered location such as under a tree canopy or near tall shrubs will also help provide additional protection from the elements. If you have existing boxes, be sure to clean them out before the start of winter and inspect them carefully for moisture or rotting wood. Keep the screws tightened and repair them as needed to ensure they provide the maximum protection from cold temps and hungry kitty cats. Nesting boxes are a real winner in my book due to their year-round benefits. They offer birds safe refuge in winter and a place to raise their young during spring and summer.

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If you are a good friend of birds like myself, then I hope you partake in some of the beneficial practices mentioned above. We can all do our part to sustain birds through the winter by providing energy rich foods, fresh clean water, and place to take shelter. Doing so will hopefully bring you a deep satisfaction and endless hours of visual enjoyment. Plus, staying busy all winter keeping your feeders and baths clean and full, will help the long dark days of winter pass without notice. Before we know it, we will hear the songs of spring from all the beautiful little birdies we helped along the way.

Happy Birding!



Photos J. Stefanski)

For questions or comments, please feel free to reach me at the UT/TSU Rutherford County Extension office. Our main office line is 615-898-7710 and my email is [jski@utk.edu](mailto:jski@utk.edu). Additionally, please check us out on the web at [rutherford.tennessee.edu](http://rutherford.tennessee.edu) to learn more about upcoming classes and all other Extension programming activities that we offer.