WALNUT CREEK SUPPLY

THE COMPLETE CARE GUIDE

Backyard Wild Birds

Feeders, water, nest boxes and a yard birds love

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> ***New owner?*** *Go straight to Section 1. It is written so you can set up a safe, correct home and get through the first 48 hours without reading anything else first.*

*There is a particular kind of quiet that settles over a kitchen on a frosty Lancaster County morning when a flash of red lands on the feeder outside the window. The coffee goes cold. Somebody whispers, "Cardinal!" as though saying it too loud might spook it. That small moment is what backyard bird feeding is really about: a front-row seat to wild lives going on a few feet from your table. This guide is about **wild** birds, the chickadees, finches, woodpeckers, hummingbirds and jays that visit your yard on their own terms. It is not about keeping pet birds. Wild birds are not ours to own, and the best backyard is one where they come and go freely, find honest food, clean water and safe cover, and are never harmed by our good intentions.*

We wrote this for Pennsylvania and the Mid-Atlantic, because that is where we live, garden and feed birds ourselves, but nearly everything here applies across the country. You will find what to buy and where to hang it, what to feed and what never to feed, how to keep feeders clean so they help birds instead of hurting them, how to handle bird flu season, how to cope with squirrels, bears and hawks, and what to do when you find a baby bird on the lawn. Read the Quick Start first, put out one feeder, and give the birds a few days to find you. Patience is the whole trick.

SECTION 1

Quick Start: Your First 48 Hours

1. **Pick one spot and one feeder.** Start simple. A single hopper or tube feeder filled with black-oil sunflower seed will bring more species than a fancy setup of five feeders full of cheap mixed seed. You can add more once you see who shows up.
2. **Choose a spot with cover nearby.** Hang or mount the feeder about **10 feet from a shrub, tree or brush pile**. Close enough that birds can dart to safety when a hawk passes, far enough that squirrels cannot easily leap onto it.
3. **Check window distance before you hang it.** To reduce window strikes, place feeders either **within about 3 feet of the glass** or **more than about 30 feet away**. Anything in between is where birds get up speed and hit the glass hard.
4. **Fill it with good seed.** Black-oil sunflower is the best single seed for the widest range of birds. Fill the feeder only about halfway at first so seed stays fresh and dry.
5. **Put out fresh water.** A shallow bird bath, about **1 to 2 inches deep** at the deepest point, with a rough bottom for grip. Water often pulls in birds that never touch a feeder.
6. **Wait, and do not hover.** It can take a few days, sometimes a couple of weeks, for birds to discover a new feeder. Watch from a window, move slowly, and resist the urge to keep adjusting things.
7. **Keep cats and dogs away from the feeding area.** Cats should be indoors, always. Feeders are a dinner bell for birds and a trap for any bird caught by a cat while it feeds.
8. **Write down what you see.** Even a scribbled list on the fridge of "Day 2: two chickadees, one titmouse" is the start of a yard list, and it makes the next step more fun.
9. **Plan your cleaning schedule now.** Mark a day on the calendar every one to two weeks to wash feeders and baths. Dirty feeders spread disease. This is the one non-negotiable habit.
10. **Check your local conditions.** If you live in bear country, plan to bring feeders in at night. If your state wildlife agency has issued bird flu guidance, follow it before you start. Both are covered in detail below.

First-Time Starter Bundle

What to have on hand before the first bird arrives, and what to look for in each category.

Essentials

- **One sturdy seed feeder** — a tube feeder with metal ports, or a hopper feeder with a roof, sized so you will empty it within a few days. Choose something you can take apart completely for cleaning. Hard-to-clean feeders are the ones that go moldy.
- **Black-oil sunflower seed** — fresh, clean, unmixed. This is the single most useful seed you can buy. Look for seed that smells fresh and shows no webbing, dust or clumping.
- **A shallow bird bath with a rough surface** — no deeper than about 2 inches, with gently sloping sides so small birds can wade in.
- **A scrub brush dedicated to bird chores** — stiff bristles, a long handle, and a bottle brush for tube feeders. Keep it separate from kitchen sponges.
- **Household bleach and a bucket** — for the 1 part bleach to 9 parts water cleaning solution used on feeders and baths. Mix fresh each time.
- **A pole system with a squirrel baffle** — a sturdy pole placed away from branches, fences and rooftops, with a baffle that blocks climbing from below.
- **A seed scoop and a sealed metal storage bin** — a lidded metal can keeps seed dry and keeps mice and raccoons out.
- **Window-strike protection** — external decals, tape patterns, or screens that break up reflections on any large window near your feeding area.

> ***Ready to set up?*** *Browse the essentials in our collections: Wild Birds & Large Flocks.*

Enrichment

- **A platform or tray feeder** — opens the buffet to ground-feeding birds like juncos, doves and sparrows.
- **A suet cage and suet cakes** — a high-fat favorite of woodpeckers, nuthatches and chickadees in cool weather, with no-melt suet for warm months.
- **A nyjer (thistle) sock or fine-mesh feeder** — for goldfinches and other small finches.
- **A hummingbird feeder with ant moat** — easy to take apart, with perches and bee-resistant ports, ready for the spring return. Use plain sugar and water only.
- **An oriole feeder** — a bright orange feeder with cups for fruit jelly or orange halves, ready for early May.
- **A nest box for the species in your area** — bluebird, chickadee or wren boxes, mounted with a predator guard.
- **A small notebook, pair of binoculars and a field guide** — the best enrichment you can buy for yourself.
- **Native plants** — a serviceberry, a dogwood, or a patch of coneflowers will feed birds in ways no feeder can.

> ***Enrichment, one click away.*** *Shop Wild Birds! - Large Flocks Too!.*

SECTION 2

Meet Your Backyard Birds

Pennsylvania sits on a crossroads. In a single year your yard can host **year-round residents** that never leave, **winter visitors** that arrive when the north gets too cold, **summer breeders** that come back to raise young, and **migrants** that simply pass through on the way somewhere else. Knowing which is which helps you offer the right food at the right time and set realistic expectations. If a bird you expected disappears in late summer, it is probably not your fault; it may be heading south.

Birds also use feeders in different ways. Some perch and pick one seed at a time. Some hang upside down. Some stay on the ground and scavenge what falls. Some skip seed entirely and want suet, nectar or fruit. Offering a variety of feeder types is how you reach the variety of birds.

Bird	Status in Pennsylvania	What it eats at feeders	Where it feeds
Northern Cardinal	Year-round resident	Black-oil sunflower, safflower, cracked corn	Ground, platform, hopper
Black-capped Chickadee	Year-round resident (northern and higher-elevation areas; Carolina Chickadee in the south)	Black-oil sunflower, suet, peanuts, mealworms	Tube, hopper, suet cage
Tufted Titmouse	Year-round resident	Black-oil sunflower, suet, peanuts	Hopper, tube, platform
American Goldfinch	Year-round resident, more numerous in winter and summer	Nyjer, black-oil sunflower, hulled sunflower	Nyjer sock, tube
Dark-eyed Junco	Winter visitor	White proso millet, cracked corn, small seeds	Ground, platform
White-breasted Nuthatch	Year-round resident	Black-oil sunflower, suet, peanuts	Suet cage, hopper, tree trunks
Downy Woodpecker	Year-round resident	Suet, black-oil sunflower, peanuts	Suet cage, tube
Blue Jay	Year-round resident, some migrate	Peanuts in the shell, black-oil sunflower, cracked corn	Platform, ground
Eastern Bluebird	Resident and short-distance migrant	Mealworms, suet, fruit, berries	Platform, open tray, nest box
Carolina Wren	Year-round resident	Suet, mealworms, peanut bits	Suet cage, ground, platform
Mourning Dove	Year-round resident	White proso millet, cracked corn, black-oil sunflower	Ground, platform
House Finch	Year-round resident	Black-oil sunflower, nyjer, hulled sunflower	Tube, hopper
Ruby-throated Hummingbird	Summer migrant	Nectar (1 part sugar to 4 parts water), small insects	Nectar feeder, flowers
Baltimore Oriole	Summer migrant	Orange halves, grape jelly, nectar	Oriole feeder, platform

Treat this chart as a starting point. Regional range, elevation and habitat shift what you see, so a good field guide or a local bird club is your best guide to your own backyard.

Residents versus migrants

Residents such as cardinals, chickadees, titmice, nuthatches, Carolina wrens and downy woodpeckers stay all year. These are the birds you will come to know as individuals, and they depend most on your feeders in the lean weeks of late winter. **Winter visitors** like juncos arrive in October and head north in spring. **Summer migrants** like hummingbirds and orioles show up in spring and leave by early fall. Some birds, including goldfinches, blue jays and bluebirds, are partial migrants: some individuals stay and some go, depending on food and weather.

The invasive newcomers: House Sparrows and European Starlings

Two species are not native to North America and were introduced by people in the 1800s: the **House Sparrow** and the **European Starling**. Neither is protected by federal bird laws in the same way native birds are, but local and state rules vary, so check yours before taking any action. Both compete aggressively with native cavity nesters, including bluebirds, chickadees and wrens, for nest holes, and they can dominate feeders.

Practical, humane ways to handle them:

- **Skip the foods they love.** House Sparrows adore millet and cracked corn; starlings love suet and mixed seed. Offering black-oil sunflower, safflower and nyjer favors cardinals, chickadees and finches over them.
- **Use feeders that favor small birds.** Tube feeders with short perches, cages around feeders, and upside-down suet feeders make life harder for large flocks.
- **Offer suet in smaller portions** and use feeders starlings struggle to cling to.
- **Choose nest box hole sizes carefully.** A hole of about 1.5 inches suits bluebirds while keeping out starlings; a smaller 1 1/8-inch hole suits chickadees and keeps out House Sparrows.
- **Monitor boxes weekly** during nesting season, and learn the local guidance from a nest box program before removing any nest, because native bird nests are protected.

SECTION 3

Feeders, Placement & Layout

The right feeder matters as much as the right seed. Different birds have different habits, and a mix of feeder styles is what turns a yard with two species into a yard with twelve. Whatever you choose, favor feeders that come apart easily, are made of materials you can scrub, and hold only a few days of seed.

Feeder type	Best for	What to put in it	Notes
Tube feeder	Chickadees, titmice, finches, nuthatches	Black-oil sunflower, hulled sunflower, safflower	Easy to hang. Look for metal ports and a removable base for cleaning.
Hopper feeder	Cardinals, jays, grosbeaks, many songbirds	Black-oil sunflower, safflower, seed blends without filler	Roofed to keep seed dry. Holds more seed, so check for moisture often.
Platform or tray feeder	Ground feeders, doves, juncos, bluebirds, cardinals	White proso millet, cracked corn, mealworms, fruit	Add drainage holes or a mesh bottom. Clean often since it is open to weather.
Suet cage	Woodpeckers, nuthatches, chickadees, wrens	Suet cakes, no-melt suet in heat	Best in cool weather. Hang near a tree trunk or branch.
Nyjer or thistle sock	American Goldfinch, House Finch, siskins	Nyjer seed	Fine-mesh sock or tube with tiny ports. Replace seed that clumps or smells off.
Hummingbird nectar feeder	Hummingbirds, occasionally orioles	Plain sugar water at 1 part sugar to 4 parts water	Clean thoroughly every time you refill. Ant moat helps.
Oriole feeder	Baltimore Orioles, other fruit lovers	Orange halves, jelly, nectar	Bright orange color attracts them. Put out in early May.
Window feeder	Close-up viewing from indoors	Small amounts of sunflower, millet	Attaches to glass with suction cups. Birds see the glass as part of the feeder.

Where to put a feeder

Think like a bird. Every time a bird comes to a feeder, it is deciding whether it is worth the risk. Give it good options.

- **About 10 feet from cover.** A shrub, small tree or brush pile within roughly 10 feet gives birds a quick escape from a hawk, while being far enough that cats and squirrels cannot easily ambush from the branches.
- **In a spot you can see from a window.** You will enjoy the feeder more, and you will notice problems earlier.
- **Out of reach of squirrel launch points.** Squirrels can jump surprisingly far, often cited as 8 to 10 feet horizontally from a fence or branch, so keep feeders well away from anything they can leap from.
- **Out of prevailing winter wind** where seed gets soaked, with morning sun where possible to dry seed.
- **Not directly over a deck or lawn you care about.** Hulls and droppings build up. A mulched or gravel patch underneath makes cleanup easier.

Window safety: the 3-foot and 30-foot rule

Birds fly into windows because they see reflections of sky and trees, or they see through a window to a plant beyond. A feeder placed **within about 3 feet of the glass** means birds cannot reach dangerous speed before they land. A feeder placed **more than**

about 30 feet away gives them room to see the glass as an obstacle. The middle distance is the danger zone. Treat these figures as common guidance rather than guarantees, and combine them with decals, screens or tape patterns on large reflective panes.

Squirrel baffles and pole setups

Mount feeders on a metal pole at least 5 to 6 feet off the ground, with a cone or dome baffle mounted below the feeder, at least 4 to 5 feet up the pole. A baffle only works if squirrels cannot jump around it, so keep poles well away from trees, fences, sheds and railings. A baffle hung above a feeder also protects hanging feeders from squirrels climbing down from a branch.

Bear safety

If you live in bear country, which includes much of northern and central Pennsylvania and many Mid-Atlantic and mountain states, birdseed, suet and sugar water are all attractants. Bears can destroy feeders and become habituated to people's homes, which often ends badly for the bear.

- **Bring feeders in at night** and hang them again after dawn.
- **Take feeders down entirely during the seasons bears are active**, which in Pennsylvania generally means spring through late fall, when bears are out of their dens. Check your state wildlife agency for local guidance, since timing and recommendations vary.
- **Store seed in a secure building or bear-resistant container**, never in a garage with the door open or on a porch.
- **Clean up spilled seed and hulls daily.**
- **Never feed bears** directly or by leaving food out.

A sample yard layout

Here is how one small suburban or country yard might be arranged. It is meant as a map, not a blueprint, and you can adjust for your own space.

Where in the yard	What to place there	Why
North fence or hedgerow	Native shrubs, a brush pile, serviceberry, and a bluebird nest box	Cover, berries and nesting close to the edge of the yard
About 10 feet from shrubs	Feeder pole with a baffle: tube feeder, hopper feeder and suet cage	Birds can dash to cover but squirrels cannot leap onto the feeders
Ground level beside the pole	Platform feeder	Doves, juncos and sparrows feed from the ground
In the open, with a shrub 10 to 15 feet away	Shallow bird bath	Clear sight lines for safety, with quick cover nearby
Near flowers, in morning sun and afternoon shade	Hummingbird feeder	Nectar stays fresh longer out of the hottest sun
A sunny bed	Coneflower and milkweed	Seeds, nectar and caterpillar food
Near the house	Any window feeder	Within about 3 feet of the glass or beyond about 30 feet, to reduce window strikes

SECTION 4

Water, Shelter & Nest Boxes

Seed gets the attention, but water is often the bigger draw. Birds need to drink and bathe all year, and a reliable water source can bring warblers, thrushes and waxwings that never touch a feeder.

Bird baths

- **Keep it shallow.** A depth of about **1 to 2 inches** at the deepest point is ideal. Add a flat stone if yours is deeper so small birds can stand safely.
- **Choose a rough bottom.** Smooth, slick surfaces are hard for birds' feet to grip.
- **Clean it often.** Scrub and rinse every few days, and refill with fresh water daily in summer. Algae and droppings turn a bath into a disease source.
- **Place it near cover but not too near.** Birds bathing are vulnerable. Put the bath where they can see danger coming, with shrubs about 10 to 15 feet away.
- **Add moving water.** The sound and sparkle of a dripper, mister or small recirculating fountain attract birds from far away. Moving water also helps keep mosquitoes from breeding.
- **Heated baths in winter.** Open water in freezing weather is a rare treasure. A bird bath with a built-in thermostatic heater, or a heater made for baths, can bring dozens of birds on frozen days. Use outdoor-rated cords and check that water has not frozen.

Nest boxes: by species

Many birds nest in cavities, and a properly built box can give them a safe place to raise a family. Some of the most common choices in Pennsylvania are listed below. The hole sizes and heights are **widely used guidance, not hard law of nature**. Before you build or buy, check with a nest box program in your area, such as a state bluebird society or a local Extension office, because recommendations vary by region and species.

Species	Hole size	Mounting height	Habitat notes
Eastern Bluebird	About 1.5 inches	Roughly 4 to 6 feet	Open lawn or field edge with scattered trees; space boxes well apart
Black-capped or Carolina Chickadee	About 1 1/8 inches	Roughly 5 to 10 feet	Wooded edges and yards with mature trees
House Wren	About 1 inch	Roughly 5 to 10 feet	Brushy areas, near shrubs and thickets
Tufted Titmouse	About 1 1/4 inches	Roughly 5 to 10 feet	Wooded yards
Tree Swallow	About 1.5 inches	Roughly 5 to 6 feet	Open fields and near water

Box basics

- **Use untreated, unpainted wood**, or plain wood on the inside. Avoid metal and plastic that overheat.
- **Add ventilation and drainage** with small holes at the top and bottom of the box.
- **Skip perches.** Perches help predators and invasive birds more than native nesters.
- **Install predator guards.** A stovepipe-style baffle or similar pole guard stops raccoons, snakes and cats.

- **Face the opening away from prevailing wind**, often east or southeast, and avoid direct all-day sun.
- **Monitor weekly** without disturbing birds during the sensitive period of incubation. Your local nest box program can teach you how.
- **Clean boxes out in late winter**, around February in Pennsylvania, before birds begin to look for nest sites. Use gloves, remove old nesting material, and let the box air dry. In many places it is legal to clean out an unoccupied box in the off season, but check your local rules.
- **Never relocate wild nests.** Native bird nests, eggs and young are protected by law in most places. If a nest is in an inconvenient place, wait until the young have fledged, then clean and plan better for next year. Check your state and local rules.

SECTION 5

Habitat & Native Plants: The 3 Basics

If feeders are the sandwich, habitat is the whole kitchen. Feeders are supplemental. Native plants, insects, water and cover are what birds really need. And here is the secret experienced bird lovers share: **the more natural food you plant, the less your feeders have to do.**

The 3 basics: food, water, cover

1. **Food.** Seeds, berries, nectar and, above all, insects. Even seed-eating birds feed their nestlings insects, mostly caterpillars. A single pair of chickadees may need thousands of caterpillars to raise one brood.
2. **Water.** Moving, shallow and clean.
3. **Cover.** Safe places to sleep, hide from weather, and escape predators. Without cover, no feeder or bath will be used for long.

Think in layers

Birds use a yard in layers, like the floors of a house:

- **Canopy:** tall trees such as oaks, maples and tulip poplars. Oaks alone host hundreds of caterpillar species, a feast for nesting birds.
- **Understory:** smaller trees such as serviceberry, flowering dogwood and redbud. They offer berries and nesting sites.
- **Shrubs:** viburnum, spicebush, elderberry and native hollies that produce fruit and provide thick cover.
- **Ground cover and perennials:** coneflower, black-eyed Susan, goldenrod, asters and milkweed. Their seed heads feed finches all winter, and their foliage hosts insects.
- **Leaf litter and the soil layer:** thrushes, towhees, wrens and juncos scratch for insects here.

Native plants that earn their space

Native plants evolved alongside local insects and birds. They host more caterpillars than most non-native ornamentals, which makes them a nursery for baby birds. General examples to consider, always checking that they are native and suited to your specific county or region:

- **Oak trees** for caterpillars and acorns.
- **Serviceberry** for early summer berries that thrushes, catbirds and waxwings love.
- **Dogwood** for fall fruit.
- **Viburnum** for berries that persist into winter.
- **Coneflower** for goldfinches and other seed-eaters. Leave the seed heads standing.
- **Milkweed** for monarchs and insect life, which birds also benefit from.
- **Native grasses** for cover and seed.

Your local Extension office or native plant society can provide lists of natives that suit your soil and light. Most nurseries now label natives clearly.

Leave a little mess

A tidy yard is a hungry yard for birds. Leave leaf litter under trees and shrubs where insects overwinter. Leave seed heads standing through winter. Leave a brush pile in a quiet corner. Delay the garden cleanup until spring, when temperatures are

steadily warm.

Skip the pesticides

Insecticides kill the caterpillars birds need and can poison birds directly. Herbicides remove the plants insects rely on. Rodent poisons move up the food chain and can kill owls and hawks. If a pest problem demands a response, pick the least harmful option and use it sparingly.

Keep cats indoors

Outdoor cats, including well-fed ones, kill large numbers of birds every year. A cat indoors is a cat safe from cars, predators and disease, and a yard full of birds is a yard that can truly relax. If your cat loves the outdoors, a screened enclosure, or a harness and leash, gives the best of both worlds. Please also keep birdseed away from areas where cats can lie in wait.

Window safety and dark skies

Many migrating songbirds fly at night and are drawn to bright lights. Turning off unneeded outdoor lights, especially during spring and fall migration, helps. Use shielded, downward-facing fixtures and warm bulbs. Treat large windows with decals, patterns or screens placed on the outside of the glass.

SECTION 6

Diet & Nutrition

Black-oil sunflower, suet, millet, peanuts and mealworms cover most feeder visitors. Hummingbird nectar is just sugar and water: no dye, no honey.

Clean Fuel, No Junk is how we feed our own animals, and it applies to wild birds too. The goal is not to fill a feeder with whatever is cheapest. It is to offer a few honest, high-energy foods that real birds want, and to keep them fresh. A bag of cheap mixed seed full of red milo, wheat and filler often ends up as a pile of rejected waste under the feeder, which attracts rats and grows mold. A smaller selection of better foods does more good.

The seed lineup

Food	Best for	Why it works	Notes
Black-oil sunflower	Nearly everything: cardinals, chickadees, titmice, finches, nuthatches, jays	High in fat and calories, thin shell, easy to crack	The best single seed if you offer only one
Hulled sunflower (sunflower chips)	Same birds, with less mess	No shells to clean up	Spoils faster and costs more, so offer in smaller amounts

Food	Best for	Why it works	Notes
Safflower	Cardinals, grosbeaks, chickadees, doves	Bitter to squirrels and grackles, which often leave it alone	Some birds need time to accept it
White proso millet	Ground feeders: juncos, doves, sparrows, towhees	Small, round and loved by ground feeders	Scatter or use a platform feeder
Nyjer (thistle)	American Goldfinch, House Finch, siskins	Tiny, oily seed	Use a fine-mesh feeder. Old nyjer dries out and birds ignore it
Peanuts (unsalted, in shell or shelled)	Jays, titmice, woodpeckers, chickadees	High fat and protein	Use a feeder that keeps whole peanuts from being carried off in bulk
Cracked corn	Doves, juncos, cardinals, jays	Cheap ground-feeder food	Spoils fast when damp. Offer only what is eaten in a day or two
Suet	Woodpeckers, nuthatches, chickadees, wrens, bluebirds	Pure energy in cool weather	Use no-melt suet in heat
Mealworms (dried or live)	Bluebirds, wrens, chickadees, robins	Protein and fat, very attractive to insect eaters	Store live ones cool. Offer in a shallow dish
Fruit, jelly and orange halves	Orioles, catbirds, mockingbirds, tanagers	Natural sugars and moisture	Offer small amounts. Remove when it ferments or draws bees
Hummingbird nectar	Hummingbirds, orioles	Quick-energy sugar	See recipe below

Suet and high-fat foods

Suet is hard animal fat, often mixed with seed, fruit or insects. In cool weather it gives woodpeckers, nuthatches, chickadees and wrens a concentrated energy source. In hot weather ordinary suet can turn rancid or melt onto feathers, so switch to **no-melt suet** (rendered, shelf-stable cakes) during the heat of summer, or stop offering it until fall. Never leave cooked bacon grease or kitchen fats out in the heat, as they spoil quickly and can coat feathers, which makes it hard for birds to keep warm and dry.

Hummingbird nectar recipe

Hummingbird nectar is simple. Do not buy the red-dyed mixes, and never improvise a recipe with honey or sweeteners.

The recipe: 1 part plain white table sugar to 4 parts water.

- **Example:** 1 cup of sugar to 4 cups of water.
- **Boil** the water briefly, stir in the sugar until it dissolves, and **cool** completely before filling the feeder.
- **No dye.** Red dye is unnecessary and may be harmful. The red parts of the feeder attract hummingbirds on their own.
- **No honey.** Honey ferments and can grow dangerous mold.
- **No artificial sweeteners.** They offer no calories, and hummingbirds will starve.
- **Plain white sugar only**, never brown sugar, raw sugar or molasses.
- **Change the nectar every few days**, more often in hot weather, **about every 1 to 2 days when temperatures are very hot**, and every 3 to 4 days in cooler weather. If it turns cloudy or you see mold, dump it, scrub the feeder and refill.
- **Store extra** nectar in the refrigerator for up to about a week.

Foods to offer and foods to avoid

Offer	Never offer	Why
Black-oil sunflower, safflower, millet, nyjer	Bread, crackers, cake, donuts	Fills birds with empty calories and little nutrition. Moldy bread is dangerous
Unsalted peanuts and plain suet	Salty foods: chips, salted nuts, bacon, processed meats	Birds cannot handle high salt levels
Fresh fruit: oranges, apples, grapes	Moldy or damp seed	Mold can cause fatal respiratory and digestive disease
Plain sugar-water nectar (1:4)	Honey in nectar	Honey ferments and promotes fungal growth
Fresh nectar changed every few days	Artificial sweeteners	No calories. Hummingbirds can starve
Clean, dry feeders refilled in small amounts	Red or other food dye	Unneeded and possibly harmful
No-melt suet in warm weather	Cooked fats and grease left out in heat	Rancid, and can smear on feathers
Fresh jelly in small amounts for orioles	Large amounts of sugary jelly or sweets	Poor nutrition and attracts ants and wasps
Mealworms	Avocado, chocolate, caffeine, onions, salt	Avocado, chocolate and caffeine are toxic to birds

Shop the food and supplies: *Browse Wild Birds & Large Flocks and Wild Birds! - Large Flocks Too!.*

SECTION 7

Feeder Hygiene, Disease & Bird Flu

A clean feeder is the most important thing you can do for the birds you feed. Concentrating birds in a small space is wonderful for watching and also wonderful for spreading disease. Good hygiene turns feeding from a risk into a benefit.

How to clean a feeder

1. **Take the feeder down and empty it.** Dump old seed in the trash, not on the ground.
2. **Scrub with hot soapy water** using a dedicated brush to remove debris and grime.
3. **Disinfect** by soaking for about 10 minutes in a solution of **1 part household bleach to 9 parts water**. Mix a fresh batch each time.
4. **Rinse thoroughly** with clean water until there is no bleach smell.
5. **Dry completely** before refilling. Damp feeders grow mold.
6. **Refill** with fresh seed.

How often

- **Every 1 to 2 weeks** for seed feeders as a routine.
- **More often in wet, humid or hot weather**, when mold and bacteria grow fast. Check every few days.
- **Every time you refill** hummingbird and oriole feeders.
- **Bird baths** every few days, with fresh water daily.
- **Discard any wet, clumped or moldy seed immediately.**
- **Rake and clean under feeders** regularly. Hulls and droppings under feeders harbor disease. Move feeders to a new spot a few feet over from time to time.

Common bird diseases at feeders

Salmonellosis

- **What you see:** fluffed-up, lethargic birds that sit on the ground, swollen eyelids, and sometimes dead birds under the feeder. It is most common in finches and often spreads through droppings in contaminated seed or water.
- **What to do:** stop feeding for about two weeks, clean all feeders and baths with the bleach solution, rake the ground, and discard old seed. Wash your hands afterward, and wear gloves when cleaning. Salmonella can affect people too.

Finch eye disease (mycoplasmal conjunctivitis)

- **What you see:** swollen, crusty or red eyes, most commonly in House Finches, sometimes in goldfinches. Affected birds may be hard-pressed to find food.
- **What to do:** take down feeders for a few weeks, clean thoroughly, and let the flock disperse before you put them back. Feeding fewer birds at once and using feeders with fewer perches help.

Aspergillosis and mold-related illness

- **What you see:** labored breathing, weakness, and birds that eat damp, moldy seed.
- **What to do:** throw out all suspect seed and clean the feeder. Keep seed dry.

Avian influenza (bird flu)

Highly pathogenic avian influenza has circulated widely in wild birds and poultry in recent years. It is a serious concern for waterfowl, raptors, poultry and sometimes songbirds. Guidance changes quickly, so the best practice is to **follow your state wildlife agency or your local Extension office** for current recommendations.

What is generally advised:

- **During local outbreaks, agencies often advise taking down feeders and baths temporarily** to reduce the chance of birds gathering and spreading the virus. When the outbreak passes, clean everything thoroughly before putting it back.
- **Do not handle sick or dead wild birds with bare hands.** Use disposable gloves or a plastic bag turned inside out, and wash hands afterward. Keep children and pets away.
- **Report clusters of dead birds** to your state wildlife or agriculture agency. The USDA sick-bird line, **1-866-536-7593**, can also direct you.
- **Keep backyard poultry separated from wild-bird feeding areas.** Wild birds can carry the virus without seeming ill. Keep feeders and baths well away from coops and runs, cover feed and water, and change shoes or boots before entering your flock area. If you keep chickens or ducks, this is especially important.
- **Clean thoroughly** and wash hands after cleaning feeders.

Because disease conditions vary by season and location, we do not give a single date or rule. Check with your state before you decide.

SECTION 8

Seasonal Feeding Calendar

Birds live by the calendar, and so should your feeders. Dates below are approximate for Pennsylvania and vary with weather, elevation and the year, so treat them as guideposts and watch your own yard.

Season	What birds are doing	What to offer	What to do
Winter (December to February)	Staying warm, burning energy fast. Juncos, winter finches and residents crowd feeders	High-fat foods: suet, black-oil sunflower, peanuts, nyjer. Keep ground feeders accessible after snow	Keep feeders full and dry. Provide heated or regularly thawed water. Clean nest boxes in late winter
Spring (March to May)	Migrants return, nesting begins, males sing and display	Mealworms, suet, sunflower, fruit and jelly for orioles, nectar for hummingbirds	Put nest boxes up by late winter. Set out hummingbird feeders by about late April. Offer oriole feeders in early May. Orioles often leave by late summer
Summer (June to August)	Raising young, molting begins, natural food is plentiful	Black-oil sunflower, nyjer, nectar, no-melt suet, mealworms, fresh water	Clean feeders more often in heat. Change nectar every 1 to 2 days in very hot weather. Keep baths fresh
Fall (September to November)	Migration, juveniles dispersing, birds fattening up	Plenty of seed, suet as nights cool, nectar for late hummingbirds	Hummingbirds leave about late September to mid-October (approximate), so leave nectar feeders up until they have been gone a couple of weeks. Leave seed heads standing. Clean and store unused feeders

SECTION 9

Common Challenges & Solutions

Every bird feeder has problems sooner or later. The good news is that nearly every one has a practical fix. Each entry below follows the same pattern: what you see, why it happens, what to do, and when to ask for help.

Squirrels

What you see: seed vanishing by the pound, feeders hanging askew or chewed, and a squirrel acrobatically upside down at the ports. **Why:** squirrels are smart, athletic and love sunflower seed. **What to do:** mount feeders on a pole with a properly placed baffle, at least 8 to 10 feet from any jumping-off point. Choose weight-sensitive or caged feeders. Offer safflower, which squirrels often dislike. Offer a separate squirrel feeder with cracked corn far away as a decoy. **When to ask for help:** if squirrels are getting into your attic or walls, call a licensed wildlife control professional.

Bears

What you see: a feeder torn down, pole bent, seed bins ripped open, or tracks and droppings around the yard. **Why:** birdseed, suet and nectar are high-calorie food for a bear. **What to do:** bring feeders in at night and take them down entirely during the months bears are active. Store seed securely. Clean up spilled seed. **When to ask for help:** if a bear returns repeatedly or becomes bold, contact your state wildlife agency for guidance and follow their recommendations.

Hawks at the feeder

What you see: the yard suddenly empties, a burst of feathers, or a Cooper's or sharp-shinned hawk perched nearby. **Why:** hawks are wild predators that hunt where prey gathers. It is natural, if hard to watch. **What to do:** place feeders about 10 feet from cover so songbirds can escape; keep a brush pile nearby. If a hawk visits repeatedly, take feeders down for a week or two so it moves on. **When to ask for help:** hawks are protected by law, so never harm one. If one is injured, contact a licensed wildlife rehabilitator.

Window strikes

What you see: a thump on the glass, a smudge or feather print, or a stunned bird on the ground. **Why:** birds see reflected sky and trees, or see through to plants on the other side. **What to do:** move feeders to within about 3 feet of the glass or more than about 30 feet away. Apply external decals, tape patterns or screens to large windows. For a stunned bird, place it gently in a covered box in a quiet, warm spot for an hour or so, keeping pets away, then release it if it revives. **When to ask for help:** if the bird is still not moving after an hour, appears injured, or has blood, call a licensed wildlife rehabilitator.

Starlings

What you see: noisy flocks that swarm suet and empty feeders in minutes. **Why:** European Starlings are aggressive, highly social and love fatty foods. **What to do:** offer suet in upside-down feeders or cages with limited access, use tube feeders with short perches, and switch to seeds they dislike such as safflower and nyjer. **When to ask for help:** if starlings are taking over nest boxes, check with a nest box program and your state rules before removing anything.

House Sparrows

What you see: large, noisy groups, aggressive behavior at nest boxes, and feeders emptied by the flock. **Why:** House Sparrows are non-native, adaptable, and love millet and cracked corn. **What to do:** skip millet and cracked corn, offer sunflower and nyjer, choose feeders with small perches, and use box hole sizes that exclude them. **When to ask for help:** if sparrows are attacking native nesting birds, consult a nest box program for humane, legal options.

No birds coming

What you see: full feeders and an empty yard. **Why:** new feeders take time to be discovered, and the yard may lack cover, water or safety. Natural food may be abundant in late summer and fall. A cat or hawk nearby can keep birds away. **What to do:** be patient for a couple of weeks. Add water, move the feeder closer to cover, offer black-oil sunflower, scatter some seed on a platform, and add a bird bath. Check for stale seed. **When to ask for help:** if you have had no birds for several weeks in winter, ask a local bird club.

Moldy seed

What you see: clumps, a musty smell, white or black patches, or sticky hulls. **Why:** wet weather, overfilled feeders and feeders with poor drainage. **What to do:** discard all of it, clean the feeder with the bleach solution, dry thoroughly, and refill with a smaller amount. Choose feeders with roofs and drainage holes. **When to ask for help:** if you see sick birds, stop feeding for a couple of weeks and contact your state wildlife agency.

Mess under the feeders

What you see: piles of hulls, droppings and sprouting seed beneath feeders. **Why:** birds shell seed and drop what they do not want. **What to do:** use hulled sunflower, install a seed-catching tray, rake regularly, and move the feeder a few feet every month or two. **When to ask for help:** if mess is drawing rats or other pests, see below.

Rats and mice

What you see: droppings, gnawed seed bags, burrow holes under feeders, or rodents at dusk. **Why:** spilled seed is a free meal. **What to do:** store seed in sealed metal bins, clean up spilled seed daily, use trays under feeders, and take feeders in at night if needed. Avoid poison, which can kill hawks and owls. **When to ask for help:** call a pest professional if you have a persistent infestation, and consult local health guidance.

Cats

What you see: a cat crouched under the feeder, or feathers on the lawn. **Why:** cats are efficient hunters, and feeding spots concentrate prey. **What to do:** keep your own cats indoors. For neighborhood cats, place feeders where cover for ambush is limited, use prickly ground cover below shrubs, and talk kindly with neighbors. **When to ask for help:** for a stray or feral cat, contact a local humane society or animal control. Be kind and leave poison and traps to the professionals.

Ants and wasps at hummingbird feeders

What you see: ants marching up the hanger, and wasps or bees swarming the ports. **Why:** sugar water is a magnet for insects. **What to do:** use an ant moat, keep feeders clean and free of drips, pick a feeder with bee guards or ports that sit flush, hang in shade, and move the feeder a few feet if wasps are bad. Do not smear oil or petroleum jelly on feeders or hangers, as it can harm birds. **When to ask for help:** if wasps nest nearby and you or a family member is allergic, call a pest professional.

SECTION 10

Birdwatching, Counts & Citizen Science

Feeding birds is only half the fun. Watching them, learning their names and sharing what you see makes you part of something bigger. Your backyard is a research station.

Getting started with watching

- **Start with the birds you know.** Learn the cardinal, chickadee and goldfinch first. Notice size, shape, color, beak, and how it moves.
- **Use a field guide or a bird-identification app.** A good field guide with Pennsylvania birds is invaluable. Sound-identification apps can name a bird by its song.
- **Learn the songs.** A morning chorus is easier to appreciate when you can name the singers.
- **Keep a yard list.** Write down every species you see. Many people start a list on the fridge and end up with a lifelong hobby.
- **Take a journal.** Note date, weather, birds and behavior. Over the years, patterns appear: first hummingbird, last junco, the year the waxwings came.

Citizen science programs

Several well-known programs welcome beginners and use your observations to help scientists track bird populations. Program details, seasons and rules change, so check their websites for current information.

- **Project FeederWatch** invites people to count birds at their feeders through the winter months.
- **The Great Backyard Bird Count** is a short, worldwide count held each winter, open to anyone who can watch for even 15 minutes.
- **eBird** is an online checklist tool where you can record sightings and see what others near you are seeing.
- **Merlin** is a free bird-identification tool that can help with photos, sounds and descriptions.

These programs welcome all skill levels. Your counts help track how birds respond to weather, disease and habitat change.

Activities for kids

- **Bird journals.** Draw each bird in a notebook, label its colors, and write what it was doing.
- **Sketching.** A pencil and colored pencils turn a rainy afternoon into art class. Try copying a feeder bird.
- **Pinecone feeders.** Roll a pinecone in plain, unsalted, fat such as vegetable shortening or suet, then in seed, and hang it from a branch. Do not use peanut butter that contains additives, salt or xylitol, and be mindful of nut allergies in your household and among neighbors.
- **Bird bingo.** Make a card of local birds and cross them off as you see them.
- **Seed-planting day.** Plant sunflowers and coneflowers and watch the birds come for the seeds.
- **A "sit spot."** Pick a quiet spot and visit it for ten minutes every day. You will be amazed how much you see.

SECTION 11

When to Help an Injured or Baby Bird

Finding a bird in trouble tugs at the heart. The kindest thing is often to do less than you think, and to call someone who knows.

Baby birds on the ground

- **Fledglings are often fine.** A young bird with feathers, hopping on the ground with short wings and a stubby tail, is probably a fledgling. Parents are usually nearby, feeding it and watching. This is a normal stage of growing up.
- **Leave it alone** unless it is in immediate danger, such as a road. If so, move it a short distance to a nearby shrub.
- **Keep pets and children away**, and keep cats indoors while fledglings are around.
- **Nestlings** are bare or fuzzy babies with few feathers. If you can find the nest and reach it safely, you may place the baby back. The idea that parents will reject a baby touched by humans is a myth, but wash your hands first.
- **If there is no nest in reach, or the bird is clearly hurt**, call a licensed wildlife rehabilitator.

A truly injured bird

Signs include a drooping wing, bleeding, being unable to stand, being covered by a cat or dog, or sitting fluffed and unresponsive.

1. **Keep pets away.** Calmly gather the bird in a lightly draped towel.
2. **Place it in a covered cardboard box** with air holes and a soft cloth on the bottom, such as a paper towel or a T-shirt.
3. **Set the box in a warm, dark, quiet place**, away from children, pets and noise.
4. **Do not feed it and do not give water by dropper.** Food or water can cause choking or aspiration and can do real harm to a stressed bird.
5. **Call a licensed wildlife rehabilitator** promptly. Your state wildlife agency or local humane society can often provide a list.
6. **Wash your hands** after handling, and wear gloves if you can.
7. **Do not keep the bird.** Hold it only until help arrives.

The law

Wild birds are protected by law in the United States, and most native species cannot be legally kept, raised or possessed without permits, even with the best intentions. This includes feathers, nests and eggs in most cases. Check your state and local rules. A licensed rehabilitator has the training, permits and facilities to give a bird its best chance of returning to the wild.

If you find several sick or dead birds, do not handle them with bare hands. Contact your state wildlife or agriculture agency, as described in the avian influenza section.

SECTION 12

FAQ

What do wild birds eat?

It depends on the species. Seed-eaters like cardinals, finches and chickadees love black-oil sunflower, safflower, millet and nyjer. Woodpeckers and nuthatches want suet and peanuts. Bluebirds and wrens want insects and mealworms. Orioles and hummingbirds want nectar, fruit and jelly. In the wild, nearly all birds depend on insects, especially caterpillars, to feed their young, as well as berries, seeds and nectar. A yard with native plants gives birds far more than a feeder alone.

What is the best bird seed?

Black-oil sunflower is the best single seed for the widest range of birds. It has a thin shell, high fat content and broad appeal. Add safflower for cardinals, nyjer for goldfinches, and white proso millet on a platform for ground feeders like juncos and doves. Avoid cheap mixes full of filler, which often get tossed to the ground and attract pests. Fresh, dry seed always beats a bargain bag.

How often should I clean my bird feeder?

Clean seed feeders every 1 to 2 weeks, and more often in wet or humid weather. Hummingbird and oriole feeders need cleaning every time you refill them. To clean, scrub with hot soapy water, soak about 10 minutes in a solution of 1 part household bleach to 9 parts water, rinse well, and let dry fully before refilling. Discard any wet or moldy seed right away, and rake up hulls beneath the feeder.

How do I attract birds to my yard?

Provide the three basics: food, water and cover. Put out black-oil sunflower in a feeder placed about 10 feet from shrubs or trees, add a shallow bird bath with moving water if possible, and plant native trees, shrubs and flowers that offer berries, seeds and insects. Leave leaf litter and seed heads in place, avoid pesticides, and keep cats indoors. Then be patient, since new feeders can take days or weeks to be discovered.

When should I put out hummingbird feeders?

In Pennsylvania, Ruby-throated Hummingbirds generally return from about late April to early May, so put feeders out around mid-April to be ready. Dates vary with the weather and location, so watch for the first reports in your area. Leave feeders up until a couple of weeks after you see your last hummingbird in the fall, usually late September to mid-October. Keep the nectar fresh and the feeder clean all season.

How do I make hummingbird nectar?

Mix 1 part plain white table sugar with 4 parts water, such as 1 cup of sugar to 4 cups of water. Boil the water briefly, stir in the sugar until it dissolves, and let it cool completely before filling the feeder. Do not add red dye, honey, brown sugar or artificial sweeteners. Change the nectar every few days, and every day or two in hot weather. Store extra in the refrigerator for up to about a week.

What birds come to feeders in winter?

In Pennsylvania, you can expect cardinals, chickadees, titmice, nuthatches, downy and other woodpeckers, blue jays, mourning doves, House Finches, American Goldfinches and Dark-eyed Juncos. Some winters bring pine siskins, purple finches or other northern visitors. Offer black-oil sunflower, suet, peanuts and nyjer, and put out millet on a ground feeder for juncos. Keep water from freezing with a heated bath, and keep feeders full on cold, snowy days.

How do I stop squirrels from eating bird seed?

Mount feeders on a metal pole with a baffle, placed 8 to 10 feet from any branch, fence or roof a squirrel could jump from. Use caged or weight-sensitive feeders, and offer safflower, which squirrels often avoid. Do not rely on a feeder hung from a tree limb. A decoy feeder with cracked corn far from your bird feeders can also help. Squirrels are clever, so expect to adjust your setup now and then.

Should I stop feeding birds during bird flu outbreaks?

Follow guidance from your state wildlife agency or Extension office. During local outbreaks, agencies often advise taking feeders and baths down temporarily so birds do not gather and spread the virus. Do not handle sick or dead birds with bare hands, report clusters of dead birds to your state wildlife or agriculture agency, and keep backyard poultry well away from wild-bird feeding areas. When guidance says it is safe, clean everything with a bleach solution before putting feeders back out.

How do I stop birds from hitting my windows?

Place feeders either within about 3 feet of the glass or more than about 30 feet away. Then break up reflections on large windows with decals, tape patterns, cords or screens applied to the outside of the glass, spaced close together. Closing blinds or curtains and turning off lights at night also helps. If a bird does hit, keep it in a covered box in a quiet place for an hour or so, and call a licensed wildlife rehabilitator if it does not recover.

> ***Ready to shop?*** *Start with Wild Birds & Large Flocks. 10% of every purchase supports no-kill animal shelters.*

SECTION 13

Every Purchase Gives Back

Before we earn a dime, **10% of every purchase at Walnut Creek Supply goes to no-kill animal shelters across the country.** Not as an option at checkout. Off the top of every order, every day, because we believe caring for animals and caring for community are the same promise made in two directions.

Backyard bird feeding is part of that same spirit. It costs little, asks for patience and attention, and gives back every single morning. When you keep a feeder clean, plant a serviceberry, put a decal on a picture window or keep your cat indoors, you are making a quiet difference for wild neighbors who will never say thank you, but will sing anyway.

We are a family business in Christiana, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. We grow our own food, tend our own gardens and orchard, and keep our own animals, and we stock goods we would put in front of our own families: **no mystery ingredients**, **Clean Fuel, No Junk**, and honest advice. If you have a question about seed, feeders, nest boxes or what that little brown bird at your window might be, call us at **(717) 983-8069**. We would love to talk birds with you.

Here is to full feeders, clean water and a good seat by the window. **Walnut Creek Supply**, Christiana, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania *walnutcreeksupply.com*