

WHAT
DOBIRDS
Eat?

By: Joe Kaestner

To attract a wide variety of birds to our backyards, we have to know what they like to eat (and what they won't eat). When it comes to eating, our backyard birds fall into three basic categories: seed-eaters, insect eaters, and predators. Predators, i.e., birds that eat mammals, reptiles, and other birds, tend to fend for themselves quite well, so we don't need to worry about feeding them.

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Most seed-eating birds, such as cardinals, finches, chickadees and titmice, will eat black oil sunflower seeds. This seed is high in fat content (very important for birds), is readily available and is relatively affordable. Safflower is a hard-shelled white seed that is a particular favorite of cardinals and house finches. It is also a good problem-solving seed, as it is quite bitter

tasting, which discourages squirrels, and it's too hard for grackles and starlings to crack open. Nyjer is a seed grown in Asia and Africa that looks like the seed of our local thistle weeds and has similar nutritional value and is a favorite of the American goldfinch.

With bird seed, it is always a good idea to use the “one month, one week” rule. Try not to buy more seed than your birds will eat in one month, and don't put more seed in your feeder than the birds will eat in one week. This will ensure that you always have fresh seed.

Many companies pack their seed blends with items that birds will not eat. Chief among these is a seed called milo, which is a small, round rust-colored seed that birds, and even squirrels, will not eat. Your feeder birds will sweep this seed aside and toss it on the ground, where it will quickly grow into a grass-like weed below your feeder. Another seed you will find in abundance in some blends is millet. While there are a few birds that will eat millet, for the most part they are ground-feeders and will never eat large amounts. Consequently, most of the millet ends up on the ground, is not eaten and will also grow into a grass-like plant. Grains are another filler in some seed blends that backyard birds do not eat.

There are many insect-eating birds in your backyard, such as woodpeckers, nuthatches, wrens and warblers. These birds will also eat peanuts, suet and fruits and berries. If you want to feed peanuts to your birds, make sure they are unsalted and have been cooked (either blanched or roasted); raw or salted nuts are not healthy for the

birds. The best suet that provides the greatest nutritional value is made from rendered beef kidney fat. Look for suet that has peanuts, peanut butter, berries or insects blended into it to add even more nutrition.

One other food worth mentioning for insect-eating birds is meal worms. Meal worms are the larvae of the darkling beetle. Bluebirds love them. Live meal worms will stay in the larval state for up to six months in your refrigerator.

The quality of the food you feed your backyard birds is more important than the quality of the feeders you use. The yard with the best food will attract the greatest variety of birds. 🐦



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