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BIRD FEEDING, BIRD WATCHING

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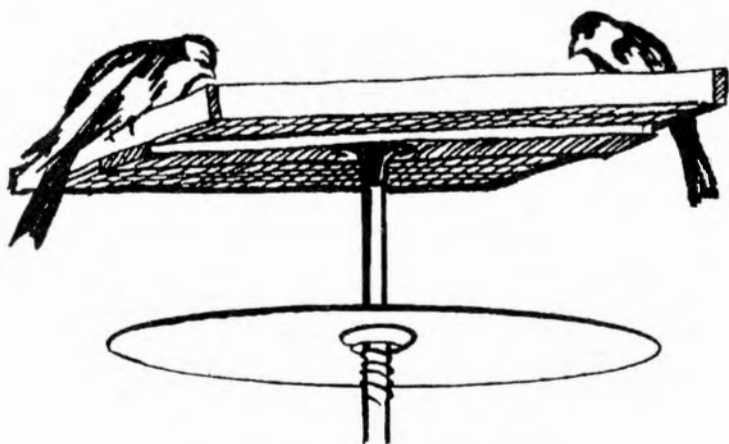
A year ago at Christmas time, I became seriously fascinated with watching birds at feeders while we were visiting our daughter in Shenandoah, Iowa. She had put out a small hanging feeder, and I spread some loose seed in the garden plot behind the house. With my binoculars, I watched for hours by the window, seeing the birds in minute detail, and I considered trying this when we got back home. Since taking courses with Dr. Martin Grant in the 1950s at Iowa State Teachers College (UNI), I have been an avid field birder. But watching birds at a feeder seemed artificial, too easy. When my children were young, we tried it one winter. We built a few feeders, bought some bird seed mix and tried to outwit the squirrels, but I didn't find the experience especially rewarding.

I changed my mind after reading some articles in *Bird Watcher's Digest* that debunked many of the myths I had believed about bird feeding. I had always believed that once a person started feeding birds, he or she was obligated to keep the feeders full or the birds would starve. However, research has shown that birds rely on one person's feeders for only about ten percent or less of their food, although feeder sources are more important during severe weather.

One article described studies done with different bird foods and seeds. Different birds clearly preferred different seeds in different feeding arenas. This information was exciting and provided me with the basis for experimenting and recording the results.

I read more articles, bought more books, made bird feeders, tried several kinds of seed and began to write down what I observed. The obsession had begun. One article labeled bird feeding and watching a "selfish act," but it didn't seem any more selfish than a lot of other things people do. Some might believe they do this for the birds' benefit. I know I do it as much for me as for them, and that's all right.

In my year of feeding, watching and notetaking, I have learned a great deal. These observations are by no means absolute or conclusive, but my present guidelines for learning more about birds and their habits within our backyard have evolved from this experience.



Finding Appropriate Seeds and Foods

If you buy a commercially packaged bird seed “mix,” you will not know what parts of the mix attract which birds and what each bird may accept or reject. Many mixes are made to look attractive to the human eye and include a variety of sizes, shapes and colors of seed to entice you to buy the package. Even when the notes on the package list the kinds of birds that will eat it, the mix may include seeds/foods that few, if any, birds will eat, or will eat only when nothing else is available. What is commercially successful differs from what is observably successful in a bird feeding situation. In a study begun in 1976 and published in 1985 by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Dr. Aelred Geis determined that a great number of birds preferred black oil seed, hulled or chipped sunflower seed, white millet and niger (thistle) seed over most others. My own experiments and observations seem to bear this out. The separate seeds can be found in garden shops, nurseries, farm elevators or hardware stores that specialize in bird feeding supplies. In addition to these seeds, providing water, suet and specialty feeders at other times of the year should attract a maximum variety of birds.

Avoiding “Problem Feeders”

Certain foods and birds’ preferences and feeding patterns produce desirable or undesirable results. Old bread slices on the ground in the back yard will soon have starlings and crows fighting over the spoils. A hopper

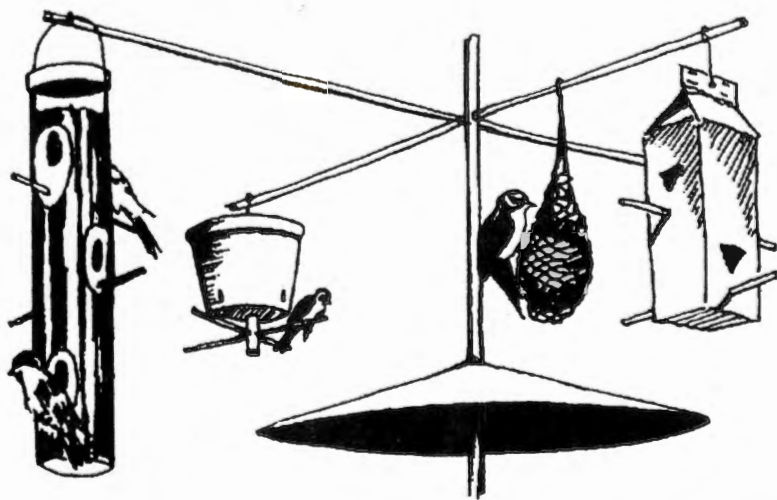
feeder filled with peanuts will most likely be dominated by starlings even though cardinals and blue jays like peanuts, too. If the starlings flock in, they may empty the suet feeders as well. Cracked corn, oil seed, millet or sunflower chips on the ground will draw several kinds of birds, but will also bring in all the neighborhood squirrels. Squirrels will also eagerly eat suet in some feeding environments, but will completely ignore suet feeders in others.

Using a Scientific Approach

By putting one kind of seed in each feeder, you can see which birds eat that seed and which combination of feeder design and seed is preferred. Some birds will choose to eat on the ground or from a broader platform; they do not like to come to an elevated feeder station. I remember filling a hanging feeder with white millet and wondering why it didn't attract anything. When I put millet on the ground, however, dark-eyed juncos, mourning doves, house sparrows, tree sparrows, and white-throated sparrows flocked to it.

Finding the Right Type of Feeder

Varied kinds of feeders can be made or bought to dispense specific seeds/foods for specific birds. The size and shape of the seed, the size and habits of the birds and the placement and number of the feeders are important factors to consider when setting up bird-feeding stations.



Thistle Seed. Commercial plastic tube feeders or feeders made from plastic soda pop bottles or lidded plastic refrigerator storage containers work well for thistle seed. These generally attract goldfinches, house finches, pine siskins, an occasional indigo bunting and, sometimes, house sparrows. The seed holes should be vertical slots approximately 1/8" wide and 3/8" long; perches should be provided about three inches below the seed holes.

Black Oil Seed. Roofed, wooden hopper feeders provide a sheltered perch for the birds and the hopper holds enough black oil seed to dispense over a period of time without refilling. These feeders tend to attract the most kinds of birds. Cardinals, blue jays, chickadees, nuthatches, purple finches, house finches, house sparrows and pine siskins frequent these feeders. Downy, hairy and red-bellied woodpeckers, as well as yellow-bellied sapsuckers and flickers are also attracted to the oil seed. Occasionally and seasonally, dark-eyed juncos, mourning doves, Brewers and rusty blackbirds, grackles, starlings and even rose-breasted grosbeaks stop at these feeders.

Placing the Feeders

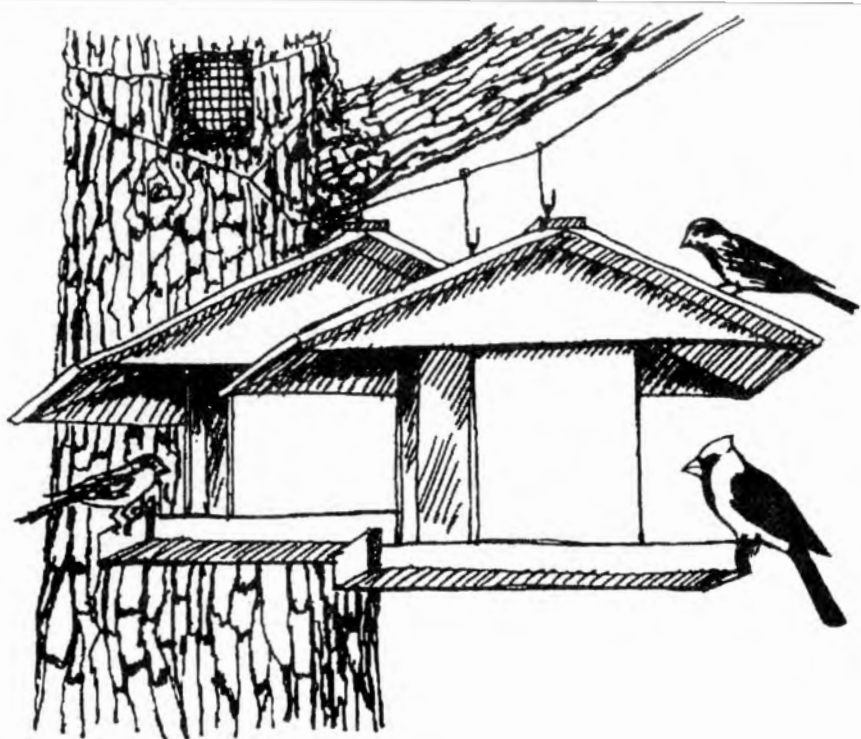
To some degree, the placement of the feeder will determine what birds will use it. I had an oil seed feeder and two thistle seed feeders under the overhang of my front porch. The bolder house sparrows became the only users due to the nearby street and sidewalk traffic. Moving the feeders into the yard invited other birds to use them; the house sparrows returned to feeding on the ground just below the feeders and no longer used them.

Offering Multiple Feeders

Another factor in the number of birds attracted to your feeding area is the number of feeders you put out. I call this "critical mass." One or two feeders may attract a few birds over a given time period, but I find that the heightened activity of birds using several feeders seems to attract a greater number and variety of birds. To test this idea, you might try locating different feeders in different spacing combinations.

Recognizing Mother Nature's Contribution

Weather and season influence the variety and number of birds that will be feeding. Sometimes sudden changes in the weather increase or decrease the feeding activity dramatically. I see many more birds and



species after a snow or ice storm than I did the day before. If the weather continues to be very cold, snowy or wet, the higher populations will persist. Under these snowy conditions and in early spring when other sources are depleted, feeders are critical to the survival of the birds. When the weather is fair, even my "regulars" may not show up. Sometimes, the birds seem to anticipate coming changes. By watching the weather maps and forecasts and expecting a change, I discovered parallels in the level of feeding activity.

Noting the Differences

Observing many birds daily over a period of time allows recognition of the birds' color, pattern and habit variables. As a field birder, I do not often have the opportunity to see these subtle differences. Besides seasonal changes in color and pattern, you may see in a group of dark-eyed juncos, for example, many small variations from the Oregon to the pink-sided to the slate-colored forms. Goldfinch color/pattern variation is constantly apparent; some birds are more olive green-yellow while others are more pink brown-yellow. Last November, I saw one that was almost

yellow-white with pure black and white wing patterns and a yellow-orange bill and feet.

Confronting the Birder's Woes

Yes, bird feeding has some problems. No feeding article would be complete without considering the difficulties of dealing with Iowa's inventive squirrels. They *will* find a way to your feeders, and they may chew them up! All of the preventative measures you can read about and think up, however, *may* help. At any given time, you can watch how any given squirrel avoids your defenses and gets to the feeder and then devise another way to prevent it from doing so. (It may work for a while.)

Another problem may be what your neighbors think about the abnormally large population of birds and squirrels frequenting your yard. To them, your observation preserve may mean noise, droppings, scattered seed hulls and critters that chew things like gardens, houses and boats. In the winter, this problem may not be acute, but, if you feed birds year round, your neighbors may think that you are really strange (and they will probably let you know this).

Becoming a "Scientific" Birder

If you are serious about bird feeding and watching, a chronological set of notes will sharpen your observations and provide you with a reflective memory tool. In my bird-watching journal, I note the time, temperature, wind speed and direction, sky conditions and other weather factors. I mention the kinds and numbers of birds I see and comment on their behavior, especially when it is something I have not seen before. My computer is by the window where I can see in two directions, so I can observe even when I'm working on something else. I try to make some notes each day and often eat breakfast where I can watch the birds. Some days' entries are only a few lines, but, when I'm at home on weekends and holidays, I make extensive or periodic notations.

Taking the Next Step

These highlights of bird feeding leave much more to know and learn. If my experiences have sparked your interest or renewed your curiosity, I encourage you to look at some of the references below and try some of the approaches I have described. The small book, *Backyard Bird Feeding*, is a quick, accurate reference. If this article helps to make birds your "passion," I invite your comments and questions.

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