



Brunswick Wildlife “Yard Birds”

The term “yard bird” is used by birders the first time a species is seen on or flying over their property. Most birders also feed birds and keep a list of their yard birds. Many individual lists across the Carolinas number over a hundred species each.

Want to improve your list? Not all yards are the same. There are ways, however, to improve any yard to better support birds. Also, the guidelines below must be followed because not using best practices may do more harm than good.

Over the birding year, backyard dynamics continually change with nest building, feeding of fledglings, the ebb and flow of birds to feeders based on dietary needs, migration, arrival of birds that will overwinter, etc.

The above photos illustrate two milestones in this annual cycle. The fledgling mockingbirds begging for food were being fed by their mother bringing suet back to their tree. They quickly learned that by flying to the feeder, they could be fed faster. Avian fast food! The other photo is of a Yellow-breasted Sapsucker that spends the winter with me.

Each year the makeup of breeding birds using my yard for nesting or feeding changes slightly. This summer’s species included Red-headed, Red-bellied, and Pileated Woodpeckers; Ruby-throated Hummingbird; Carolina Wren; Brown Thrasher; American Robin; Common Grackle; Brown-headed Nuthatch; and Chipping Sparrow.

For your yard, potential improvements for birds include: providing water sources, not using herbicides or pesticides, creating small brush piles to provide cover, and reducing a lawn by creating a natural area. Landscaping with native plants that provide cover, nest sites, and natural food sources such as nuts and berries is a great way to attract and help birds.

Winter feeding is important because natural food is scarce. The colder it is the more birds need to eat. Many resident songbirds eat insects during the summer and must change diets to fruit and seed during winter.

I have found black-oil sunflower seed to be the best food, with suet a close second. This combination attracts a wide variety of birds. Other good ways exist such as combining peanut butter with oatmeal and filling the crevices of a pine tree or using halved oranges and grape jelly to attract orioles. Unfortunately, my schedule leaves no time for these.

Suet is best for cold weather; however, if you use it during the hotter months, replace the cakes frequently before the suet becomes rancid.

Hummingbird feeding was discussed in a previous article; however, I will repeat the basics. Sugar water should be prepared by dissolving one part sugar in four parts hot water and let cool before filling your feeder. The water does not have to be red so it's best to stay away from store-bought "nectar" and other products that contain red dye.

Cleaning hummingbird feeders with warm soapy (antibacterial) water and replacing the sugar water every two or three days is recommended. Small bottle brushes, designed to clean mold out of feeding holes, plus a toothbrush are the tools needed. Similar cleaning of other feeders and birdbaths is just as important. A long bottle brush works well for tube feeders.

The hulls and seeds from the base of your feeders should be raked and removed every week to prevent deadly mold and bacteria formation. Seeds should be stored in a waterproof container to keep them dry and free of mold and, if the seed inside your feeder tubes becomes wet, replace it.

Other precautions are necessary. Feeders should not be too exposed and should be close to natural shelters that provide cover from predators and the elements but away from windows since birds may fly into the reflection of the sky at break-neck speed.

Feeders and birdbaths must be protected from cats. Cats hunt and kill instinctively regardless of how well they are fed. Cats should be kept inside or be heavily supervised when outdoors. Unfortunately, bell collars are not effective.

Do not worry about making birds dependent on your feeders. Your feeders are important but supplemental sources of food. Birds will find other sources if your feeders become empty during a vacation or other absence; besides, they consume approximately seventy-five percent of their food from natural sources even when they can readily access feeders.

Bird populations vary naturally from year to year so a decline in certain species at your feeders is probably not cause for concern. Also, the number of birds coming to feed may change daily based on the availability of natural food, weather, and dietary requirements.

What to do more? Participate in citizen scientist efforts like the Cornell Lab of Ornithology's Project FeederWatch (<http://birds.cornell.edu/pfw>) or Audubon and Cornell's Great Backyard Bird Count (<http://www.audubon.org/gbbc/index.shtml>) to support research while increasing your enjoyment of backyard birding.

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