

Time to Get Those Bird Feeders Filled

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

A popular pastime that has become even more popular during the pandemic is back yard bird feeding. While some of us feed birds year around, many others feed mainly from late fall through spring. You can do whatever you want to, but here are some tips and helpful hints to keep in mind.

Virtually all seed eating birds that come to our bird feeders prefer black oil sunflower seeds. In many trials by the US Fish and Wildlife Service, no matter where you were in the country, no matter what birds came to your feeder, they all like black oil sunflower seeds. You can put sunflower seeds in almost any kind of feeder and birds will eat them. Other sunflower seed types, mainly the black and grey striped confectionary sunflowers are also utilized but not as widely. Most likely this is due to the larger size of the confectionary sunflower seeds.

Far too many backyard bird feeders buy inexpensive seed mixes and then put them in an elevated or hanging feeder. Then they get upset because birds throw a lot of that seed out on the ground. Bird seeds that we feed can be broken down into two basic groups: grains and oil seeds. Grains are things like millet, corn, milo, wheat, etc. Oil seeds are things like sunflower, safflower, niger (nyjer) thistle, or peanuts. Grains are generally low protein and high starch. Oil seeds are higher in protein as well as oils (fats).

Birds that come to hanging (elevated) feeders generally want oil seeds. This is species like Goldfinches, Pine Siskins, House Finches, Chickadees, Tufted Titmice and woodpeckers. If grain is present in these hanging feeders, many species will just throw it on the ground to get to the oil seeds. Birds that routinely feed on the ground will eat the grain, actually, prefer the grain, but will certainly eat sunflower seeds as well. The ever popular Northern Cardinals are most commonly found feeding on the ground. Other species that feed on the ground include the juncos (sometimes called snowbirds) as well as the native sparrows like Harris's Sparrows and doves. To minimize waste and how often you have to fill the feeders, only put oil seeds in hanging feeders and if you have ground feeders, go ahead and put seed mixes in those.

Many people put thistle seed in the tube feeders with the narrow slit openings for the goldfinches and siskins. This allows these small birds to eat without being "bullied" by larger birds. The trouble with thistle seed though is that it is expensive and can go rancid far more quickly than other oil seeds. Many of us have stoped feeding it and use sunflower seed chips which have a longer storage life.

There are suet cakes which are basically suet (animal fat) mixed with binders and seeds, as well as seed cakes which are held together with some sugary binder. These are placed in special feeders and are very popular with woodpeckers, nuthatches and sometimes chickadees. The last thing, or maybe I should say the first thing, that homeowners should also consider is putting out a bird bath with a bird bath heater. Open water can be a challenge for birds to find in cold winter temperatures or dry summer months. Water can also attract bird species like bluebirds and waxwings that don't come to seed feeders.

You don't have to have one of every kind of feeder. You can put out one simple feeder with sunflower seeds and likely get along just fine. Give it a try, have fun watching the birds, and if something shows up you don't recognize, call me!