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## Feeding Birds in the Winter

The life of a bird in the winter may not be as stress-free as many people think, as Jim Morgan always reminded all of us. In much of North America, winter can be a difficult time for birds. The days are short, and nights are often cold and long. The natural food supply has been consumed or is hidden by snow. Most insects are dead or dormant. Water can be hard to find, and food needed to provide the energy to keep birds warm might be scarce. Finding shelter may not be easy. If there are limited natural evergreens or shelter, birds may seek manmade houses or habitats that can provide refuge from the winds, rains, ice or snow of winter.

Birds are warm-blooded. In general, this means that they maintain their body temperature within a certain range even when the temperature around them changes. The maintenance of body temperature within a normal range depends on the amount of heat the bird produces. On cold, wintry days, most birds fluff up their feathers, creating air pockets, which help keep the birds warm. The more air spaces, the better the insulation. Some birds perch on one leg, drawing the other leg to the breast for warmth.

To keep up their high metabolic rate, most backyard birds eat rich, energy foods such as seeds, insects and suet. There are some times, however, when birds are not prepared to deal with sudden drops in temperature or sudden winter storms. At times like these, it is especially helpful to have feeders full so that birds can find food easily.

Twice each year, nearly 80 percent of birds in the U.S. make incredible migratory journeys, sometimes flying up to 90 hours without stopping or feeding! With a resume like that, it's worth taking a closer look. Feeding birds, especially during winter months when natural sources are limited, will enable keen observers to get a close-up view of their antics, structures, and meal preferences. Students can also learn to identify who's who and set up a host of feeding experiments. Bonding with birds can inspire a passion for preserving habitats and explorations of how they intersect with our lives. After all, we enjoy food, clothing (think "down"), and other products that hail from the avian world. And our language and literature are enriched with bird references, sayings, and symbolism.

Building a feeder (or several types that entice a variety of visitors) is a wonderful starting point. Using materials that would otherwise be recycled or discarded can spark new discussions and inquiries. Before you decided which type(s) to build, have students observe or research birds' feeding habits. Once they've done their "market research," they can decide which projects to tackle.

Come spring, students may be ready to create a living menu by raising garden flowers with seeds and nectar that birds love or planning a more ambitious habitat that includes shrubs, trees, and other elements that sustain year-round and seasonal visitors. Almost any container that can hold bird food and be placed

in a safe feeding area can serve as a feeder: half a grapefruit peel, an empty coconut shell, a mesh bag, a used pie tin, or a combination of these odds and ends. Below you'll find directions for building a milk carton feeder and tips on creating platform and suet feeders, and links to more ambitious projects.

To protect visiting birds from predators, do your best to locate feeders near shrubs or trees where they can quickly find cover. Make sure they're far enough off the ground to foil neighborhood cats. Other important bird feeding health and safety tips are available from the Point Reyes Bird Observatory. Materials needed for milk carton feeder are scissors, nail, milk or juice carton, cord (or a coat hanger if you have a way to cut it), 10- to 12-inch twigs or chopsticks, and birdseed. For a platform feeder children can try different variations on this feeder such as adding a roof to provide protection from rain and snow, painting it with camouflage colors and patterns, or making it from a plastic milk container. Let students' imaginations and growing knowledge of birds guide their design options. Simple instructions are:

Prepare carton. Wash the carton and allow it to dry completely. Staple or tape the pour spout closed. Use the nail to make a hole in the top edge of the carton. This is where you'll thread the string hanger.

1. Cut feeding holes. Starting about 2 inches from the bottom of the carton, cut a 2-1/2- to 3-inch-tall triangular section from each corner. Make perches. Use the nail to make a hole to receive twigs or chopsticks.
2. Fill 'er up! To stock your bird cafe with seeds, make a funnel from a rolled piece of paper or cardboard, and pour in the seed. Thread the string through the top hole, and hang your feeder. If you use a coat hanger, cut a section and bend it to create a hook on both ends for hanging.)
3. For platform feeders: To protect ground-feeding birds such as juncos and sparrows from prowling predators, provide a raised surface. This could be a pie tin hung with string or wire from a tree, or a simple wooden frame covered with window screen and nailed to a post. An important feature to build into your platform feeder is drainage: wet seeds grow mold, which can be dangerous for birds. Once a week or so, hose down the feeder to clean off any bird droppings, as they can spread disease if they accumulate among the seed.
4. For suet and peanut butter feeders: One reason to encourage birds in the garden is that they help out with pest control by eating insects and worms. How can we help out when this important source of protein and fat is scarce? You can buy bags of mealworms at some supply outlets to fill feeders, bird fanciers typically provide their backyard visitors with suet (beef fat) or peanut butter. The easiest feeder for suet is a plastic mesh bag like those that oranges or onions come in.
5. Suet turns rancid during hot weather and can harm birds; until the weather turns cool, it's best to fill feeders with commercially prepared suet cakes. You can make your own. For peanut butter lovers, simply slather a batch into the crevices of a dry pinecone. We made these feeders with the children who attended our 4-H Christmas Fun Night. Hang your protein packages within view of a window, and watch the woodpeckers, nuthatches, and chickadees flock in!
6. For more information on feeding birds, including suggestions for dealing with unwanted visitors (cats, squirrels, and other rodents), cleaning feeders, and feeding FAQs, visit the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's Web. Educational programs of the Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service serve all people regardless of race, color, age, gender, religion, disability or national origin.