

How to take care of birds this winter

Use this checklist to make sure your backyard friends stay fed and happy when cold weather hits.

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Make it easier on backyard birds this winter by offering them food and shelter when temps start to plummet. (Photo: Barbara Müller-Walter/flickr)

Baby, it's miserable outside. This will be especially true for those living on the East and Gulf coasts, where [2014-15 winter forecasts](#) are calling for temperatures to be below average. But at least folks in those and other areas of the country can seek refuge indoors when the mercury plummets.

Not so for birds that are year-round residents in those regions. They'll just have to fluff their feathers and figure out how to stay warm as best they can.

They are well-adapted to doing that, of course. But there's general agreement among ornithologists that we can [make it easier for them to tough out a harsh winter](#). Here's a checklist to help you do your part, not only for birds but also for squirrels and chipmunks — despite their summer shenanigans. And as luck would have it, it's just in time for [National Bird Day](#) on Jan. 5.

Stock up. Before winter weather hits — or during breaks in the weather — stock up on winter bird supplies such as seed, extra feeders and even extra birdhouses.





A Northern flicker eats suet out of a feeder. (Photo: Elaine Davis/Shutterstock)

Buy nutritious bird food. Black oil sunflower seed or blends that are high in black oil sunflower seeds are excellent choices. They provide the nutrients birds need and attract a wide variety of birds. You can also put out other food sources that are high in fat. These include [suet](#), meat scraps and peanut butter. The latter, despite what some might tell you, won't cause birds to choke. When you're at the grocery, pick up a bag of raw peanuts in the shell. It's fun to watch birds such as blue jays swoop down, carry them off to a tree branch, and peck at them to get the tasty reward inside.

Tips: "First time bird feeders can be inclined to just grab the least expensive bag of bird seed on the shelf," said Angie Keane of Audubon Park wild bird food. "However, budget blends are typically best suited for ground-feeding birds like quail or doves, which is great if those are the birds in your area and you want to attract them. However most people tend to want to attract perching songbirds. They prefer premium blends with a higher percentage of sunflower seeds and nuts." If you can find them, add meal worms to your feathered menu selection. Once the birds know meal worms are available, those tasty snacks will disappear quickly!



Tube feeders (left) and hopper feeders (right) help keep seed dry. (Photos: Robert & Pat Rogers/flickr and Amy Kerkemeyer/Shutterstock)

Choose feeders carefully. Not all feeders are created equal. Some are better than others at keeping seed dry. This is important because if the seed gets wet it is susceptible to fungal and bacterial growth. Several good feeder choices are hopper and tube feeders. Be aware that hopper feeders are magnets for squirrels. Also be aware that squirrels can jump farther than you might think: 4 to 5 feet vertically and 8 to 10 feet between objects. Depending on the structure of your feeder, you may want to add a squirrel baffle to the post.

Extra feeders. If the winter in your area becomes especially harsh, the birds will appreciate your efforts in adding an extra feeder (or two!) to your yard to help them get through times when lingering snow prevents access to some of their food sources. When you stock up on supplies, be sure to keep this in mind.

Tip: Some birds are ground feeders and prefer to have seed scattered in areas such as bushes or under a deck where they are more protected from predators.

Windbreaks. There are many ways to create a windbreak if you don't have a natural one in your yard. Piling up yard debris that you can remove in the spring is one way. Careful placement of a Christmas tree in the yard or garden is another. The only limits on windbreaks are your imagination!

Tip: Putting weather-proof materials against a windbreak to create a lean-to effect also helps create a protected areas for the birds. Windbreaks are also a good place to scatter seed.



Birds may return to houses to roost on freezing nights. (Photo: Amy Johansson/Shutterstock)

Birdhouses. If you have them, leave them up. Some people think you should take them down because the birds aren't nesting and the houses may attract unwanted critters. While it's true the birds aren't nesting during the cold months, they will use [birdhouses](#) for roosting on freezing nights — sometimes with multiple birds cramming into a single house.

Tip: Add some roosting material such as dry grass or wood shavings to the bottom of your house(s) to help the birds stay warm. Avoid moisture-absorbing materials such as sawdust.

Water. Be sure to provide a water source. Don't worry about the birds bathing in it and freezing to death. They won't get their feathers wet when the air temperature is below freezing. Depending on how cold it is in your area, you might want to change the water several times a day or empty the water source at night to keep the water from freezing.

Tip: If you're still concerned about the water causing the birds to freeze, don't make the water source too deep for them to get into it or add several sizable rocks to prevent them from having the room to bathe.



Feed squirrels and they may leave your bird seed alone. (Photo: CatchaSnap/Shutterstock)

Don't forget the four-legged critters. [Squirrels](#) have a great sense of smell and can detect food from considerable distances. Putting out food blends made for critters in a different part of the yard just might help keep squirrels, chipmunks and other creatures from the food you put out for the birds.

What other ways have you found to feed birds and critters during the winter that we haven't included on our checklist? Let us know in the comments section so other readers can benefit from your experiences. If you have photos of birds enjoying your efforts, please post them as well.