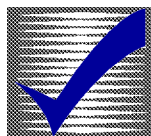




HOW-TO BOOKLET #3141

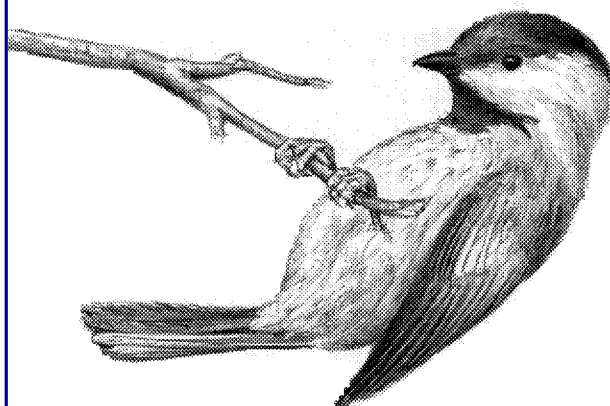
ATTRACTING BIRDS



TOOL & MATERIAL CHECKLIST

- Sunflower Seeds
- Safflower Seeds
- Thistle Seeds
- Handsaw
- Brace and Bit or Electric Drill
- Millet
- Wood
- Hammer
- Birdbath
- Corn
- Suet
- Nails

Fig. 1: Black-capped chickadee



Read This Entire How-To Booklet For Specific Tools and Materials Not Noted in The Basics Listed Above

Of all the creatures around us, birds have a special place in our hearts. Their songs brighten the mornings, their plumage delights the eye. Their comings and goings herald the changing of the seasons. As more and more of us live in urban and suburban surroundings, birds provide a welcome link with untamed nature. While most backyards are visited by at least a few birds, it's not difficult to entice many more to stop by, perhaps even to set up housekeeping for a season. If you like to garden, you may find yourself creating a backyard habitat as attractive to a wide range of fascinating creatures as it is to you.

In this How-To Booklet, we'll discuss the basic needs of birds and how you can satisfy them in your landscape.

THE NECESSITIES OF LIFE

Birds, like all animals, require food, shelter, and water to survive, and they are more likely to frequent places that provide all three rather than just one. The specific nature of these necessities varies greatly from species to species, place to place, and time to time. Take food, for example. Some birds, such as bluejays, eat a variety of insects, seeds, and fruits, but most birds have limited diets. Finches and grosbeaks are primarily seed eaters, mockingbirds and waxwings prefer berries,

wrens and woodpeckers eat mostly insects, and hummingbirds drink nectar. Bird diets often change with the seasons. Bluebirds eat moths and other flying insects in the summer but switch to berries in the winter when insects are scarce.

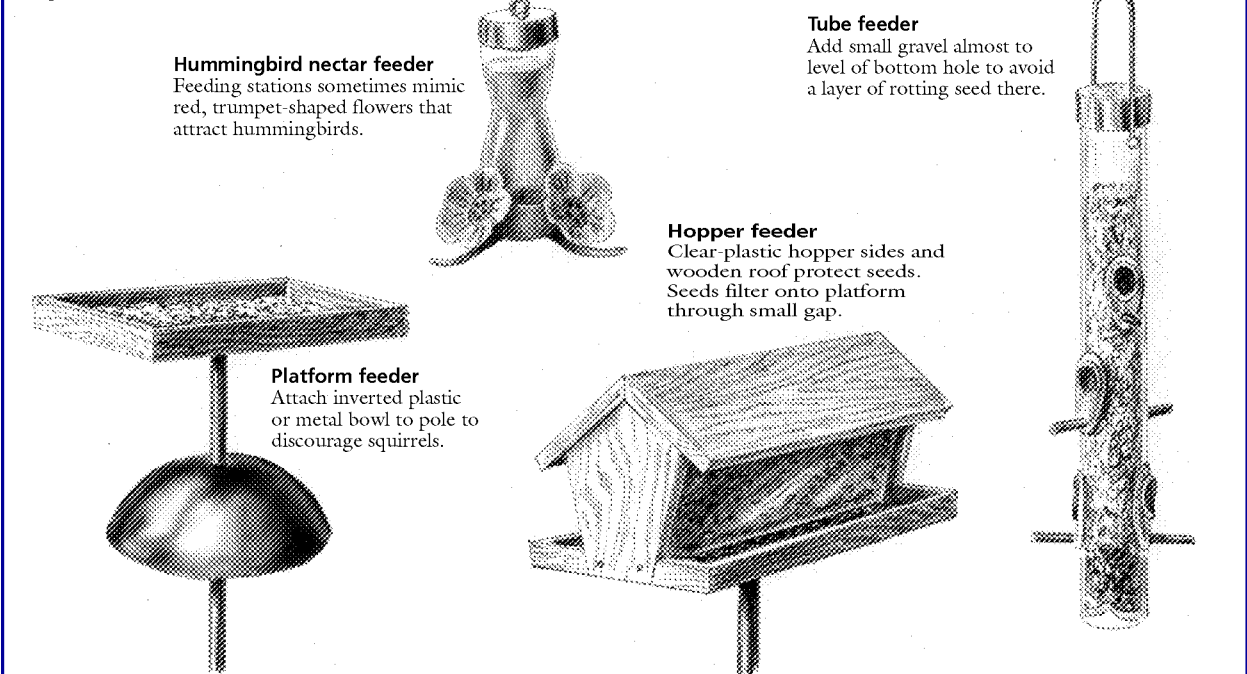
Given this diversity, it is important to know what birds frequent your region and something of their particular needs and preferences. Local nature centers and County Extension agents are excellent sources of information. Rare is the town without a dedicated and knowledgeable bird lover; frequently there are a whole group of them. These people are usually more than happy to assist novices who share their passion. If you can't locate them otherwise, ask at your local library.

FOOD

You can attract a lot of birds simply by providing a well-stocked bird feeder year-round. The most popular bird foods are sunflower seeds and suet, but offering additional kinds of food may attract even more birds to your yard. Here are some desirable ones.

- **Sunflower seeds.** These are particularly popular with chickadees, cardinals, nuthatches, titmice, finches, and grosbeaks. Buy the smaller, black-oil type, rather than the striped sunflower seeds kids eat in great quantities. They are cheaper, smaller (easier for small birds to handle), and more nutritious.
- **Millet.** These tiny round seeds are inexpensive. Ground feeders, such as doves, juncos, and sparrows, find millet attractive. Cardinals, pine siskins, and purple finches, as well as some waterfowl, also eat millet.
- **Safflower seeds.** If your feeder is overrun by squirrels, crows, or grackles, try safflower seeds, which are more expensive than sunflower seeds but unappealing to these critters. Cardinals are especially fond of them.
- **Thistle seeds.** Also called Niger seed (some of it comes from Nigeria), these tiny black seeds

Fig. 2: Basic bird feeders



Hummingbird nectar feeder
Feeding stations sometimes mimic red, trumpet-shaped flowers that attract hummingbirds.

Tube feeder
Add small gravel almost to level of bottom hole to avoid a layer of rotting seed there.

Hopper feeder
Clear-plastic hopper sides and wooden roof protect seeds. Seeds filter onto platform through small gap.

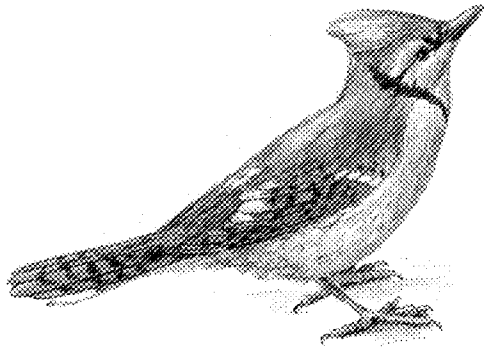
Platform feeder
Attach inverted plastic or metal bowl to pole to discourage squirrels.

are favored by a variety of finches, juncos, and indigo buntings. High in oil and protein, thistle seeds are also expensive.

- **Corn.** Large birds, such as bluejays, crows, and various fowl (ducks, wild turkeys), eat whole or coarsely cracked corn. Finely cracked corn appeals to mourning doves and other medium-sized birds. It's inexpensive, and the whole and coarse-cracked kinds, which don't readily absorb water, can be scattered on the ground.
- **Suet.** Of course, suet is animal fat, not a seed, but suet is frequently provided at bird feeders during the winter to attract woodpeckers, nuthatches, chickadees, and other birds. Encased in a simple basket of vinyl-covered wire, suet can be hung from a feeder or tree; attach the basket firmly lest raccoons appropriate it.

Bird feeders. Like the seed they hold, feeders vary according to the types of birds you wish to attract (or discourage) and the landscape in which they're placed. **Fig. 2** shows a selection of general-purpose feeders.

- **Platform.** The simplest bird feeder is merely a flat platform, perhaps with a low lip, raised above the ground on a pole. It will attract all sorts of birds, but also squirrels and possibly other critters as well. Inverting a plastic hemisphere on the pole beneath the feeder can discourage squirrels. (An aluminum mixing bowl works as well.) Rain makes a mess of the unprotected seeds, so you might want to add a roof.
- **Hopper.** These feeders offer several improvements over a platform. The plastic-sided

Fig. 3: Blue jay

hopper holds a quantity of seed, kept dry by a roof, which is fed out to the birds by gravity as they eat. Make sure the space between the plastic side and the platform is no more than 1/2 inch—larger openings may trap the head of a small bird. Hopper feeders mounted on poles or hung from trees can be easy prey for squirrels.

🏠 **Tube.** Smaller, but less vulnerable to squirrels, these feeders are ideal for hanging next to a window because they don't block much of the view. Look for sturdy construction; remove attached trays, which tend to become fouled with hulls and droppings.

🏠 **Nectar.** Hummingbirds are among nature's most fascinating creatures—tiny, beautifully colored birds whose wings beat up to 80 times per second as they fly up, down, forward, backward, upside down, and hover. Hummingbirds can be found in many parts of the United States, and you can entice them to visit with an inexpensive feeder containing a sugary liquid that mimics the nectar they seek in plants. Hang the feeder during frost-free months, change the fluid often to keep it clear of fungi and bacteria, and keep your eyes peeled for minuscule visitors.

Natural food. A bird feeder, while effective, is the fast-food stop of the avian world. To provide more types of birds with a more varied diet on a long-term basis, and provide yourself with a richer birding experience, think about making your landscape into a bird feeder. Trees, shrubs, annuals, perennials, and vines produce seeds, fruits, and nuts that appeal to many birds, as well as harboring insects palatable for others. (We'll discuss later how plants also provide shelter, the second of the three essentials.)

Do some research to match the birds you desire with the plants they desire. Hummingbirds, for example, are especially fond of plants with red and/or funnel-shaped flowers, such as fuchsias, penstemons, trumpet vine, and bee balm. It's relatively easy to experiment with annuals and even perennials to see which are effective bird attractors. But trees and shrubs represent too large an investment in time and money to leave things to chance. Remember that local information is the most reliable—find out what works for experienced bird gardeners in your area.

That said, there are some general principles worth bearing in mind. Seek out native plants (plants indigenous to your area) rather than plants imported for ornamental or commercial reasons. It stands to reason that local birds will have developed tastes for plants with an equally long history in the area. Create if you can a varied menu, with a mixture of seed-producing plants (native grasses, sunflowers), berry producers (elderberries, serviceberries, hollies), and insect harborers (alder, willow).

Select plants that will stock the larder year-round. The dried seed heads of wildflowers and grasses provide fall and winter forage for the birds and winter beauty for you. As you gain experience, you'll be able to make improvements, adding plants to bolster meager fare at certain times of year or to attract specific birds whose preferences are absent.

SHELTER

Birds, like other animals, require a number of different kinds of shelter. They look for a handy

haven when threatened by a predator. They need a place to rest and sleep and be protected from driving wind, rain, and snow. And they need a secure spot to raise their young.

The last of these requirements is the most specific. Birds can be very fussy about where they will nest. The ovenbird constructs a little domed hut on the forest floor, while orioles weave a delicate bag high in the branches of an elm or maple. When dive-bombed by a hawk, however, a nearby thicket of almost any sort will be a welcome sanctuary for quite a number of birds.

Many of the same plants that provide food also offer shelter, though birds may not nest where they feed. So, once again, plan a varied landscape to accommodate a range of birds. Choose plants of differing heights and densities. Because a few large trees can dominate a city lot, shrubs and smaller trees allow for more diversity. Evergreens are particularly valuable. Hollies, junipers, pines, and cedars all provide year-round shelter and food. In warmer climates, evergreen oaks and southern magnolia do the same. "Natural" hedges and screens that are pruned lightly if at all are likely to work better for birds. Formal, sheared hedges can develop almost impenetrably dense branching structures.

Wildlife is prolific where different habitats meet. Naturalists call this the "edge effect." You can create similar conditions by planting a small woodland on one corner of the property or along a fence line, with trees at the back and shrubs of various sizes extending to the lawn or, better yet, a strip of "meadow" where native grasses mingle with wildflowers.

Shelter needn't be alive. Dead trees, piles of brush, hollow logs, eaves and attics of buildings can all be valuable. Tidy people attempting to encourage wildlife have to balance their desire for orderliness with the attractions of a "messy" landscape to birds and other creatures.

Birdhouses. Sometimes the natural cover you can provide isn't right for nesting. And sometimes children (and adults) want to take a more active role in nature's domestic dramas. Whatever the reason, people have been building birdhouses for a long time.

You need not be much of a carpenter to build a satisfactory birdhouse (or nesting box, as they are more accurately called). All you need is a handsaw, brace-and-bit or electric drill, hammer, and a few nails. A small supply of 3/4-inch-thick wood, purchased at the local lumberyard or home center or salvaged from a tumbled-down barn, will work just fine.

Birds don't really care what style the structure assumes, but they have definite preferences for the accommodation's interior dimensions, the size of the main entrance and its height above the box floor, and the box's height above the ground. The chart provides critical dimensions for a number of North American birds. If your favorite isn't there, your County Extension agent is likely to know its preferences.

In addition to making the box the right size, make it easy to clean so you can offer it year after year. A hinged roof or removable floor works best for cleaning. Remember how stuffy a tightly enclosed room can be on a warm day, so don't make the box airtight; add slits if necessary for ventilation. Bore small holes in the floor so rainwater can drain out. Birds are more likely to nest in a box that is stationary than in one swinging in the breeze. If you put it on a pole, add a bowl as described for feeders to discourage unwanted guests. When you place a box, try to think like a bird—where will the box be safest from predators?

WATER

The final requirement, water, can be the simplest or the most challenging of the three basics to provide. A traditional pedestal birdbath is relatively inexpensive and can be set up in a few minutes. Like a small bird feeder, it will serve the needs of a transient population of birds; how many depends on your

area. At the other end of the spectrum is a backyard pond, fully integrated into a naturally landscaped wildlife habitat and garden. A pond involves considerable planning and labor, but the rewards are also considerable, for you as well as the birds.

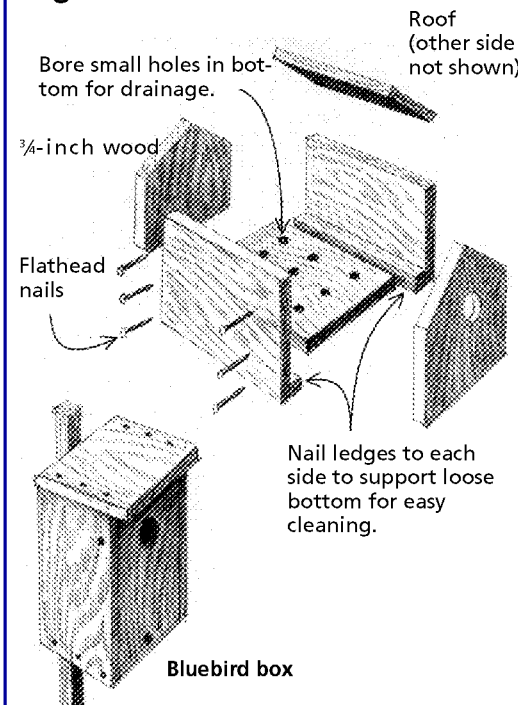
Effective birdbaths offer the same features as the ones provided by nature—puddles. The bottom slopes gently, so that birds can find a depth at which they feel comfortable—a fraction of an inch for some. A small "island" partially submerged in the middle of the water can provide shallow wading if your "bath" has sides that slope too steeply. Not all puddles are on the ground, and birdbaths can be at any height. Raised above the ground they make bird watching more difficult for feline stalkers and easier for human voyeurs.

Birds are at a protective disadvantage when bathing

or drinking, so locate their water in an open area where they can see predators coming in any direction. Some shrubby cover 10 to 15 ft. away may be appreciated for a quick escape when the cat is on the prowl or as a perch while preening wet feathers.

All sorts of shallow receptacles can be pressed into service as birdbaths. Once you've satisfied the birds' requirements, feel free to please yourself—a large steel disk from a farmer's disk harrow is surprisingly elegant. Birds appreciate fresh, clear water as much as we do, so bear in mind that you'll need to replace stale or dirty water, and make up for evaporation. Making a drip-feed bath or trickle waterfall can answer most of those needs as well as being a delight in itself. Such creations range from a dripping garden hose to a recirculating pump feeding an elaborate landscaped pool and waterfall.

Fig. 4: Birdhouse basics



BIRDBHOUSE DIMENSIONS

Bird	Interior (Length x width x height in inches)	Entrance (Diameter x height in inches)	Height (Above ground, in feet)
Bluebird	4 x 5 x 8 to 12	1½ x 6 to 10	5 to 10
Chickadee	4 x 4 x 8 to 10	1½ x 7	6 to 15
Carolina wren	4 x 4 x 6 to 8	1¼ x 4 to 6	5 to 10
Common flicker	7 x 7 x 16 to 18	2½ x 14 to 16	6 to 20
Downy woodpecker	4 x 4 x 9	1¼ x 7	5 to 15
House wren	4 x 4 x 6 to 8	1¼ x 4 to 6	6 to 10
House finch	6 x 6 x 6	2 x 1	8 to 12
Nuthatch	4 x 4 x 8 to 10	1¼ x 7	12 to 15
Purple martin	6 x 6 x 6	2¼ x 1	10 to 20
Screech owl	8 x 8 x 12 to 15	3 x 9 to 12	10 to 30
Titmouse	4 x 4 x 8 to 10	1¼ x 7	5 to 15
Tree swallow	5 x 5 x 6 to 8	1½ x 4 to 6	10 to 15