

Feeding Birds During the Winter

Jody Walthall*

Sunday, December 9, 2001

During birdfeeder discussions with your friends, do they mention ruby-crowned kinglets, yellow-rumped warblers and three-winged long-tailed seed beaters? You might ask, "What are those and why don't I get them at my feeder?" There are steps that you can take to correct this inequity.

The primary determinant of diversity at feeders is habitat. The varieties of trees and shrubs in your yard that provide either berries, seed or cover for birds is a part of your habitat that you can improve. A common situation in North Florida is plenty of tall trees in the yard, but a lack of understory trees. Some understory trees with wildlife food value are red buckeye, silverbell, hawthorn, hoptree, blue beech, cherry-laurel and dogwood. A few berry-producing shrubs are American beautyberry, blueberry, hearts-a-bustin', native viburnum, female wax myrtle and holly.

Wax myrtle is so attractive to overwintering yellow-rumped warblers and ruby-crowned kinglets, that my family collects branches of the berries, hanging them outside the window. Before long, birds appear to eat the treasured waxy gray berries. Hollies with their bright red winter fruit never fail to attract our resident mockingbirds and large flocks of migrating cedar waxwings and robins.

This winter, also watch for large flocks of goldfinches. You will hear them high in the trees, feeding on sweetgum seeds. When the fall harvest of their favorite wild seed is exhausted, they descend in great numbers on our feeders, which are stocked with sunflower seed and niger (also called thistle seed). Niger is best dispensed from a tube feeder or inexpensive thistle sock. You will get five to ten goldfinches clinging to the sock at a time. In April, you will get to see the males change from their drab winter outfit to their beautiful yellow and black breeding plumage just prior to migration. Offer cracked corn and white millet or a quality mixed seed to attract ground feeding birds like the towhee, brown thrasher and our winter visitors from the north - the white-throated sparrow and chipping sparrow. These seeds are best dispensed on a large platform feeder.

To attract the above mentioned kinglets and several different species of warblers, as well as woodpeckers, wrens and others, provide suet cakes in small wire suet cages. Suet cakes are a mixture of beef fat and cornmeal and probably attract a wider variety of birds than any other food that you might offer.

Your birds also need water to drink. Give them a clean and steady water supply in a bird bath or pool. You will see birds at water that will seldom visit feeders. Watch for warblers, vireos, thrushes and bluebirds at your birdbath, especially if you set up a mister or dripper that provides moving water. Now about that three-winged long-tailed seed beater - don't spend too much time watching for him!

For a closer look at the birds mentioned in this article, visit Birdsong Nature Center's bird window this winter. For information about the nature center, call (229) 377-4408.

**Jody Walthall is co-owner and landscape designer at Native Nurseries and a member of the University of Florida IFAS Leon County Extension Advisory Committee.*

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