The Joy of Feeding Birds

Photo by David Baron: Goldfinches prefer sunflower seed or nyjer seed as they visit us for the winter.

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Autumn bird migration brings many beautiful species south to spend the winter in North Florida. These birds come to warmer climes joining others that stay with us year ’round. The easiest way to attract and view these interesting birds up close is to offer the correct types of bird food.

Most ordinary mixed birdseed is loaded with red millet which has actually been bred to be distasteful to birds, but is included in some mixes because it is cheap. Chipping sparrows and white-throated sparrows, both winter migrants, along with resident rufous-sided towhees and brown thrashers, prefer white proso millet. These four birds are ground feeders, often preferring flat, platform type feeders.

You cannot go wrong with black-oil sunflower seed for cardinals, bluejays, chickadees, titmice and white-breasted nuthatches. If you offer these birds standard mixed seed, they will throw out 90% while looking for the 10% sunflower. Use a tube feeder for sunflower distribution; you may want to spring for a squirrel or raccoon baffle to protect your investment in quality food.

Goldfinch and orioles may require special foods and feeders. Though goldfinch eat sunflower, they love nyjer seed, sometimes called thistle. Nyjer is a very small seed dispersed from a special feeder with small openings. An inexpensive goldfinch feeder is a nylon sack called a thistle sock. Orioles prefer four unique foods – sugar water, grape jelly, oranges and suet cakes made from beef fat. Some oriole feeders can dispense sugar water, jelly and an orange at the same time.

Suet cakes are also favorites of yellow-rumped warblers, ruby-crowned kinglets and orange-crowned warblers, all winter migrants. These are some rather exotic names for some very small birds! Resident pine warblers and yellow-throated warblers seem to
partake of suet only in winter when insect populations are down. These two species are strikingly beautiful and are always a joy to watch outside our window on the suet feeder.

The other dimension to attracting beautiful birds is the vegetation in your yard. Having a variety of trees and shrubs is desirable. Your yard should have both overstory trees like pines and oaks and understory trees such as dogwoods and redbuds. Lots of shrubbery is also desirable, offering cover from predators. Many shrubs and trees provide berries and seeds that sustain birds through the cold winter months. To attract robins or cedar waxwings, you must have berries on plants like holly, dogwood, cedar, pyracantha or Oregon grape.

Being aware of bird migration makes the changing seasons more interesting and enjoying the beauty and antics of birds at our feeders is a great way to spend a cold winter day. Providing them with a consistent and clean supply of food is rewarding, knowing it makes their search for sustenance a little easier.

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