

My Yard – November Attracting Birds

Nebraska Statewide Arboretum, plantnebraska.org

Phe·nol·o·gy | noun | study of the timing of repeated seasonal activities such as migrations or flowering, especially in relation to climate and plant and animal life.

Gardens are for sharing. While you may not be inviting friends over for a garden party this winter, it's the perfect time to welcome in some birds. Summer birds have migrated to warmer temperatures and winter birds have begun to settle in for the winter. Our landscapes are never for our use only, and particularly in winter when our personal "habitat" is primarily indoors. Habitat consists of three essentials—food, water and shelter.



Food and water

Birds will find their own food sources, but they are more likely to visit, stay and nest in your yard if food and water are reliably available. Plants are crucial components of any habitat and, in return, birds spread the seed far beyond their static reach.

Native plants offer the most extensive resources for native birds. We tend to think of plants in terms of visible leaves, flowers and berries but the creatures they hide (insects, crustaceans, moths, butterflies and larvae) provide the high protein and calcium that birds need; and few non-native plants support these crucial populations.

Some of the best native tree species for birds are oak, cherry, dogwood, maple and serviceberry. For late winter food when few other options remain, there are fruits that are only palatable after a series of freeze and thaw cycles: smaller fruited crabapples, hackberry, hawthorn, persimmon, sumac, viburnum and conifers.

The best foods for birdfeeders are ones high in oil and fat, like sunflower seed, peanuts, nyjer thistle and safflower seed. A big advantage of safflower seed is that it's favored by cardinals, grosbeaks, chickadees, doves, and native sparrows but not by most other sparrows, starlings and squirrels. Since some birds prefer feeding on the ground rather than higher up, placing a low mesh platform increases usability. Making grit like eggshells or crushed limestone available, either mixed in with the feed or on a separate tray, further increases desirability.

Water is essential year-round, and rarest during severe cold. There's an abundance of bird bath heaters available but they can be difficult to maintain. Though we haven't tried this, Cornell Lab of Ornithology recommends what seems a simple, doable option: "A homemade solution is to put a light bulb in a flower pot and place the water basin on top. The light bulb will provide more than enough heat to keep the water from freezing."

Cover

The best shelter for birds is located where it can protect them from north winds, ice and heavy snowfall. Conifers are extremely valuable shelter after deciduous trees and perennials have lost their foliage. Leaving piles of brush and leaf litter adds to both the food supply and the cover. It's good to offer shelter within a few feet of birdfeeders for quick getaways. If birds are flying into windows, it may help to move the feeder either closer to the window, within 2-3 feet, or farther away at an angle from the window.

It may take awhile for birds to show up, but their numbers will increase as the weather gets colder. Nebraska is home to 400 or more species of birds and, with our challenging winter weather, if you feed them they will come.