

# Mecklenburg Audubon Society

## Backyard Notes: Bird Feeder Basics



If you want to attract large numbers of birds to your feeder consider these questions when purchasing a feeder:

1. How many birds can it accommodate at one time? Choose tube feeders with a large number of portals and hopper or platform feeders with large feeding areas.
2. Is there easy access? Can the birds reach the seed easily or does debris fill up and clog the holes?
3. How does the seed flow? Access to seed through higher portals on some tube feeders become impossible because as birds feed the lower the seed level gets. Are the holes through which the seed flows large enough?
4. Are lips low enough for debris to be blown away or kicked out by the birds?

How do your feeders measure up?

Here are a couple of other things to think about.

Wood may be the most unsanitary material to use for a bird feeder because, regardless of whether it's cedar or pine, wood absorbs water, food, and bacteria. Feeders are supposed to protect food from the elements (and from creatures you'd rather not feed). The best and healthiest feeders are made of metal and/or polycarbonate (hard) plastic.

If you want to feed cardinals but are tired of feeding squirrels, you'll have to compromise. Try switching to Safflower seed. Squirrels don't seem to like it — yet. While birds don't love it, cardinals, doves, finches and chickadees will eat it. Despite manufacturers' claims, no plastic feeder is squirrel-proof.



rel-proof. But you can squirrel-proof any feeder by putting it on a pole with a baffle (the underside lathered with Vaseline and hot pepper) 10' from a squirrel jumping-off point. Or you can use a metal, spring-loaded hopper feeder. (from A Guide to Backyard Birds 1992 Calendar.)

## Types of Feeders

In general, seed-feeders fall into three categories: tray feeders, hopper feeders, and tube feeders. Additional specialty feeders include suet, nyger, hummingbird, and peanut feeders. Each type attracts different kinds of birds, and has advantages and disadvantages. Choosing more than one type will attract more species and avoid feeder congestion.

### Ground/Platform Feeders

A platform feeder is any flat, raised surface onto which bird food is spread. They are usually simple screen-bottomed trays and typically sit several inches off the ground or your deck and help to keep grain or seeds and bird droppings from coming in contact with each other. Some feeders have covers to keep seeds dry and keep out snow and rain; others may have wire mesh to keep out squirrels and large birds like crows. The platform should have plenty of drainage holes to prevent water accumulation.

Ground feeding tables should be placed in open areas about 10 feet from the nearest tree or shrub to give birds a chance to flee predators. Avoid using ground feeders if cats are likely to pounce from nearby shrubs. Doves, juncos, sparrows, towhees, goldfinches and cardinals are all likely to visit ground feeders.



## Tube feeders

A tube feeder is a hollow cylinder, often made of plastic, with multiple feeding ports and perches. If you are going to put out just one feeder, this is your best choice. Be sure to select a model with metal ports around the seed dispensers to protect the feeder from nibbling squirrels and house sparrows.

Tube feeders keep seed fairly dry, and they are somewhat squirrel resistant. Their attractiveness to various bird species depends on the size of the perches under the feeding ports: short perches accommodate small birds such as finches, but exclude larger birds such as grackles and jays. The size of the feeding ports varies as well depending on the type of seed to be offered.

Hang the feeder at least five feet off the ground and try to position it near a window where you can enjoy the visitors, which are likely to include chickadees, titmice, nuthatches, goldfinches, siskins and purple and house finches.



## Hopper feeders

A hopper feeder is a platform upon which walls and a roof are built, forming a “hopper” that protects seed fairly well against the weather. Birds hopping on the feeder trigger the release of seeds. Hopper feeders should be positioned on a pole about five feet off the ground and will draw all the species that tube feeders attract, along with larger birds like jays, grackles, red-winged blackbirds and cardinals.



## Suet feeder

Suet is popular with titmice, chickadees, nuthatches and woodpeckers. Wrens, creepers and warblers will also occasionally peck at suet.

While you can hang suet chunks in a mesh onion bag, you can also purchase wire-mesh cage feeders. Suet cages that are only open at the bottom tend to be starling-resistant but allow woodpeckers, nuthatches, and chickadees to feed by clinging upside down.

Some people like to make their own suet “puddings” by grinding the suet and adding seeds, and create homemade suet feeders by packing the mixture into the crevices of large pine cones or smeared into knotholes of trees.

Suet feeders can be hung from trees, from poles near other feeders, or from a wire stretched between trees. Avoid feeding suet when temperatures rise into the 80-degree range, as it can turn rancid.



## Thistle (nyjer) feeder

Especially designed to dispense thistle (nyjer) seed, these feeders have tiny holes that make the seed available only to small-beaked finches such as goldfinches, chickadee, titmice and pine siskins. Hang your thistle feeder from a tree or from a pole at least five-foot off the ground. Look for feeders that have the holes below the perches. To get at the seeds the bird must hang upside down from the perch. Goldfinches, chickadees and titmice can do this easily but house finches can't. In fact it's very entertaining to watch them try!!

## Hummingbird Feeder

A hummingbird feeder is a specially made bottle or tube, usually constructed of glass or plastic, that dispenses nectar through small holes. When choosing a feeder, make sure it is easy to take apart and clean, because the feeder should be washed thoroughly or run through the dishwasher frequently.





### **Peanut feeder**

A peanut feeder is a wire-mesh cage, often cylindrical, with large holes for shelled peanuts. Several species, including jays, nuthatches, chickadees, tit-mice, and woodpeckers, readily consume peanuts.

### **Make-your-own feeder**

Many backyard bird watchers construct their own feeders. Some have made feeders from materials such as moose antlers and tree bark; others have simply smeared pine cones with a peanut butter/corn meal/suet mix, then hung them in trees. Have fun creating your own feeder, but be sure to avoid sharp edges on which birds can be harmed or crevices in which they can be trapped.

### **More Information:**

Project FeederWatch

<http://www.birds.cornell.edu/pfw/AboutBirdsandFeeding/FeederTypes.htm>

Audubon at Home: Bird Feeding Basics

[http://www.audubon.org/bird/at\\_home/bird\\_feeding/index.html](http://www.audubon.org/bird/at_home/bird_feeding/index.html)

