



“Feed the birds!”¹

Across Britain many once common garden birds are now in decline as a result of reduced habitat and foraging.² The simple act of installing a bird-table and providing food daily could mean the difference between life or death for many small birds.³

Feeding birds does not have to be complicated - you can simply scatter food on the ground⁴ or hang a seed-feeder from a tree.² However setting up a bird-table is the best way of providing a safe place for birds to eat.² Of course tables can be purchased at local garden-centres but it is perhaps more creative and satisfying to make your own. One can be constructed easily and cheaply with salvaged timber.

“The table...doesn’t need to be sophisticated.”⁵

Basically a bird-table consists of a flat, cleanable, platform, about 400 x 400 mm,² with a 10mm high up-stand fixed to the perimeter to prevent food from being knocked off.⁶ It should also have holes drilled into the platform to allow rainwater to drain away.⁶ This should be mounted on a post about 2m high to prevent predation by cats.⁷ The table needs to be stable⁸ - so provide a cross shaped base to stop it from being blown over.⁹ Many people also add a roof to protect the birds and food in bad weather.⁷ Once complete the structure should be painted with a water based preservative.⁶



“Unhygienic stations can...transmit diseases.”¹⁰

A busy bird table can cause the spread of disease. So clean the bird table every two weeks, using a mild disinfectant and hot water.² Also remove any mouldy and stale food.¹¹

“The siting of the bird-table is critical.”⁵

Ideally your bird-table should be placed where it will not be disturbed - for instance in the back garden. Also it should be close to the house so it's convenient for daily feeding.⁵ It needs to be set in the open with a good all-round view so the birds can see that they are safe from predators while they feed. It should also be a couple of meters away from some bushes to give the birds a safe refuge.⁹

“Different birds eat different things depending [on] their beaks.”²

Finches for example have strong beaks and are capable of cracking sunflower seeds but birds with pointed bills are insect eaters and need something softer.⁵ Therefore providing a mixture of seeds and fat makes the ideal food for a variety of birds.²

Bags of commercial seed mixes are now sold in most supermarkets.¹¹ These generally have a range of seeds including:

Sunflower seeds which are rich in protein and unsaturated oil² and provide an excellent year-round food.¹¹ These are eaten by Blue Tits.¹¹ Nyjer seeds also have a high oil content¹¹ and are appreciated by Goldfinches.² Also broken maize and dried peas which are eaten by Blackbirds, millet by House Sparrows and wheat which by Doves.¹¹ Peanuts are high in protein² and will attract Robins and Wrens.¹¹ However always present crushed and never use whole or salted or dry roast peanuts.¹¹ Coconuts should be cut in half and hung from your table or a nearby branch - but never feed desiccated coconut.⁴

Many birds such as the Redwing are fruit eaters.⁷ So provide apples and pears cut into segments. Chopped bananas, grapes,⁸ and raisins are also suitable.²

“Fat balls...are an excellent winter food.”¹¹

Birds need high levels of saturated fat such as suet or lard to keep warm in the winter.¹¹ Fat cakes are easy to make and provide essential diet requirements.²



You can also use kitchen scraps including pieces of soaked bread, pastry and biscuits.² Unsalted cooked rice, grated cheese, and off-cuts of fat are also ideal.⁷ But avoid all salted foods, dry bread¹⁰ and milk.¹¹

“Winter feeding benefits birds most.”⁸

It is especially important to feed birds during the winter - but ornithologists recommend feeding them throughout the year.⁴ Once you begin providing food the birds will come to rely on you –therefore you should try to feed them at a regular time - everyday.⁵

The food...we provide can have a very positive influence on bird populations.”²

Thankfully many people already “feed the birds”¹ - so why not join them and build your own bird-table and put food out regularly? This small act when combined with millions of others across the country could make a significant contribution to wild bird populations of Britain.



REFERENCES

- 1 Sherman.R and Sherman.R (1964)
Feed the birds. (From: Mary Poppins)
Walt Disney Productions
- 2 Lavelle. M (2009)
101 Ideas for a wildlife-friendly garden
Random House Group
- 3 Thomas. A (2017)
Gardening for Wildlife
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
- 4 Chinery.M (2004)
The wildlife friendly garden
Harper Collins Publishers.
- 5 Baines.C (2016)
RHS Companion to Wildlife Gardening
Frances Lincoln Ltd
- 6 RSPB (2018)
Making a bird table
<https://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/advice/how-you-can-help-birds/feeding-birds/all-about-bird-tables/making-a-bird-table/>
- 7 Nottridge. R (2009)
Wildlife Gardening
The Crownwood Press Ltd
- 8 RSPB (2018)
When to feed garden birds
<https://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/advice/how-you-can-help-birds/feeding-birds/when-to-feed-garden-birds>
- 9 RSPB (2018)
Where to put a bird table
<https://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/advice/how-you-can-help-birds/feeding-birds/all-about-bird-tables/where-to-put-a-bird-table/>
- 10 RSPB (2018)
Open a bird café
<https://www.rspb.org.uk/get-involved/activities/give-nature-a-home-in-your-garden/garden-activities/openabirdcafe/>
- 11 RSPB (2018)
Safe food for birds
<https://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/advice/how-you-can-help-birds/feeding-birds/safe-food-for-birds/>