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Backyard Wildlife

Tips for Success

The fifth in the backyard wildlife series, this NebGuide describes tips for success in bird feeding, adding water, birds to expect, dealing with nuisance wildlife, and others.

Ron J. Johnson, Extension Wildlife Specialist

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Bring the mystery, color, and wonder of nature to your home and provide a helping hand for wildlife at the same time. Songbirds, butterflies, and even fish or turtles in a backyard pool provide an open window for nature observation, an opportunity often lost in nonfarm environments. Awareness of migrating songbirds can increase interest in global connectivity, with return of migrants from Mexico and South and Central America during spring, and return during fall of species that nest farther north.

A home landscape can provide a place for wildlife as well as an environment that suits your family's needs and preferences. Bird feeding adds a food source and brings birds close for easy observation. Bird houses provide nest sites for cavity-nesting birds such as house wrens, chickadees, woodpeckers, and others. A bird bath or other water source adds another important component. More information is available in other NebGuides in this Backyard Wildlife series.

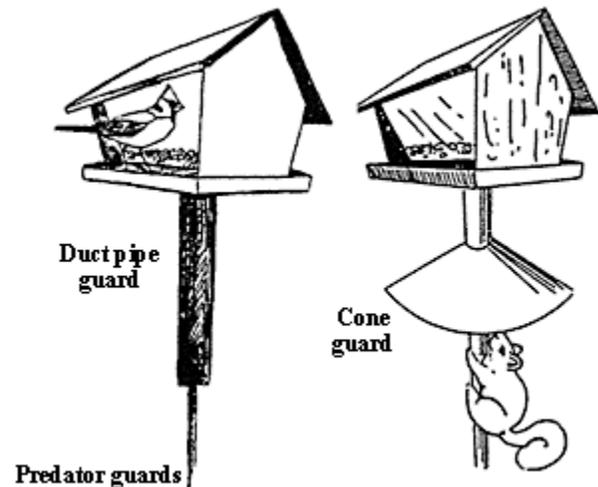
Bird Feeding Stumpers

Dealing with squirrels

To deter squirrels, place feeders at least 7 to 8 feet away from solid tree limbs, fences or railings, and try to situate feeders so squirrels can't jump onto them from above. To prevent access from below, erect feeders about 5 feet above the ground so squirrels can't leap up to them, and add a guard over the feeder

pole. One that is simple and effective can be made from aluminum duct pipe, about six inches in diameter and 24-inches long, installed over the feeder pole directly under the feeder. Squirrels that climb the pole can go inside the duct pipe from the bottom but are stopped when they encounter the bottom of the feeder. For feeders without a flat bottom, cover the lower end of the pipe with hardware cloth so that squirrels are stopped at that point. A variety of commercially available guards and specialty feeders are designed to prevent or discourage squirrel access to bird feeders.

Another approach is to lower the attractiveness of the food in feeders where squirrels are a problem. One option is a repellent feed additive called Squirrel Away™ that deters squirrels but not birds. The active ingredient is capsaicin, a derivative of peppers, which may have been nature's way of discouraging seed-gnawing rodents while encouraging pepper-eating birds that spread the pepper seeds. Alternatively, consider offering safflower seeds, which are attractive to several birds but not squirrels. Finally, some people enjoy feeding squirrels hard corn on the cob, and, to increase the squirrel antics, suspend the cob on a length of chain or place it in on a device that rotates.



Sanitation

Keeping your bird feeding station clean is an important part of a bird feeding program. Because birds congregate at feeding stations, there is increased potential for transfer of disease from one bird to another. Although disease problems are seldom observed at feeding stations, a watchful eye and good judgement usually prevent most problems before they occur. To minimize risk, keep feeders clean and disinfect them occasionally; a solution of one part household bleach to nine parts water is convenient and works well for this. Be especially alert during warm summer months because wet food can quickly develop molds. Occasionally sweep or rake spilled seeds and seed hulls from under the bird feeder so they don't build up over time and become moldy or interfere with grass or flower growth.

What about less-desirable birds?

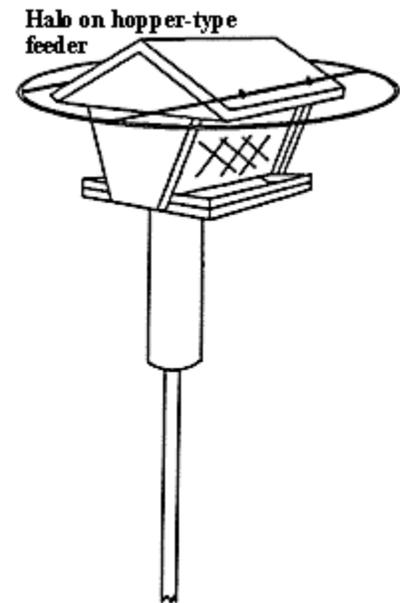
There will always be some birds at feeding stations that are less desirable than others. You can reduce attractiveness to house sparrows, European starlings, pigeons (rock doves), and, to some degree, common grackles, by avoiding bread, popcorn and pastry products. The seeds offered also make a difference. A mix with 50 percent or more small oil-type sunflower seeds, about 35 percent white proso millet, and 15 percent finely cracked corn is less attractive to house sparrows than mixes with a higher percentage of the millet or corn. Including a portion of these small seeds in your feeders, however, attracts other birds such as juncos, mourning doves, and many native sparrows. Another option is to use more than one feeding station so that aggressive or larger birds can't take over, or try offering different seeds or seed mixes at different feeding stations.

Note that house sparrows, European starlings, and pigeons are exotic species that were imported into the United States from Europe. The house sparrow is actually a weaver finch, and in a different family from our native sparrows. Our many native sparrows, which include song sparrows, Harris's sparrows, lark sparrows, white-throated sparrows, chipping sparrows, field sparrows, and others, are all native and beneficial songbirds.

Hawks may occasionally come to your feeders searching for smaller birds. Although this sometimes causes concern for the smaller birds, predation is a natural phenomenon that won't significantly harm songbird populations. Birds at feeders usually adapt and become more wary, and, eventually, the hawk moves on. Also, consider that when birds find readily-available food at feeders, they can spend less time searching for food and more time scanning for predators, a potential advantage. Should a hawk cause concern in your backyard, it may help to check feeder placement and move the feeder away from the hawk's line of approach or to within 10 to 20 feet of dense shrubs or similar protective cover. Another possibility is to temporarily limit feeding to times when the hawk is not active—for example, early morning or evening hours. Generally, however, such predation events are brief and the best course is to tolerate the situation and take no action.

Magic Halo

Another option for excluding house sparrows is a hoop device developed from research at the University of Nebraska and now marketed as the Magic Halo (Patent Number 5,295,455). This device is a specially designed wire circle about 30 inches in diameter that is placed like a halo over the feeder. During research studies, this hoop effectively repelled adult house sparrows from elevated feeders. It didn't interfere with other bird species, and it allowed house sparrows to feed on spillage under the feeder, a possible attraction to some shy bird species that may rely on the wary house sparrow to signal danger.

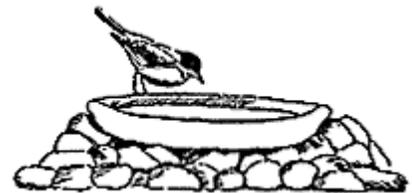


The option of hanging four clear monofilament fishing lines from the hoop device downwards (spaced 24 inches apart), which increased the repellency to house sparrows, also repelled blue jays and discouraged common grackles. But use caution: Adding the lines also discouraged Northern cardinals in some situations. If you should decide to add lines, think about the potential effects in relation to your goals and bird feeding situation. And consider that the hoop device, without lines, deterred only house sparrows and allowed other birds to come and feed normally.

Water Wisdom

A dirty bird is not happy and neither is a thirsty one. Providing a water source year-round attracts birds for drinking and bathing, and results in fascinating scenes of bird behavior at the bird bath. Clean feathers insulate better, and bathing helps birds keep parasites down.

Many bird baths are available for purchase, and substitutes can be made from large clay saucers, upside-down garbage can lids, or similar containers. These can be encircled with rocks or small logs to increase their aesthetic appeal. Bird baths should be about 1 to 3 inches deep, dull or neutral in color, and not easily tipped. They should have a roughened bottom so birds have a foothold. They can be placed on the ground or elevated a few feet, and, as with bird feeders, should be in a somewhat open area but with cover within about 10 to 20 feet. For winter months, a bird bath heater is a great addition for convenience and for keeping the water open and available when birds need it.



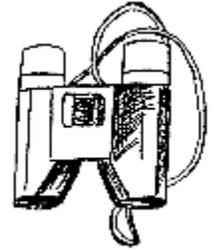
Consider the attractiveness and enjoyment of a small pool, which could provide water for birds and a home for a few fish (which eat mosquito larvae), turtles, and other aquatic life. Small fiberglass or

plastic pools can be purchased, or a pool can be dug and lined with plastic. Be sure to include some shallow areas where birds can drink and bathe.

The sounds of running or dripping water are attractive to birds, and a variety of commercial flowing-water systems are available for backyards. Here is another simple approach that may increase the bird activity at your water bath. Use a recycled plastic jug with a lid. Punch a tiny pin-hole in the bottom, then add water and the lid. Loosen the lid just enough so that water drips from the pin-hole in the bottom. Hang over your water bath where the dripping may alert and entice more birds to come.

Some Common Birds to Watch For

Migrating songbirds travel to your backyard from as far away as South America, Central America, Mexico, or Canada, and some resident species remain year round. *Table I* shows examples of birds that might be seen in Nebraska's backyards. *Neotropical migrant* species nest in North America and winter south in Mexico or Central or South America. Examples that often occur in backyards include Northern Orioles, Ruby-throated Hummingbirds, Chimney Swifts, Purple Martins, House Wrens, Eastern and Western Kingbirds, Barn Swallows, and many of the colorful, insect-eating warblers.



Another group of birds that return to Nebraska during warm months are the grassland birds. Because of their habits and need for open areas, these birds are generally not common in towns near people and are sometimes overlooked. In rural grassland areas, however, they are likely to be neighbors close at hand. Examples include Eastern and Western meadowlarks, lark sparrows, dickcissels (look like a miniature meadowlark), horned larks, bobolinks, Franklin's gulls, and others. Although familiar examples of these species are still fairly easy to find, and to take for granted, many have been steadily declining over the past 25 years. Be aware of these birds and, where you can, help with efforts to conserve open grassland habitats that they need for nesting and foraging.

Fall and spring migration brings birds such as dark-eyed juncos and Harris' sparrows that nest farther north. Dark-eyed juncos, sometimes called snowbirds, are common at bird feeders during winter, nearly always feeding on the ground. Harris' sparrows are songbirds that nest in northern Canada but winter in the central United States. People from the East and West come our way to see these distinctive native sparrows, which are fairly large and have a black crown, face, and bib, and a pink bill. And finally, think about the year-round habitat needs of cardinals, chickadees, downy woodpeckers, and others that stay with us through the seasons.

Table I. Examples of birds observed in backyard habitats and seasons when most likely seen.

Bird	Feeder use?	Bird	Feeder use?
<i>Year-round residents</i>		<i>Summer and/or spring or fall migration</i>	
Northern bobwhite	R	Red-winged blackbird	R
Northern cardinal	C	Indigo bunting	H
Black-capped chickadee	C	Gray catbird	U
Mourning dove	C	Brown-headed cowbird	C

House finch	C	Common grackle	C
Northern flicker	U	Rose-breasted grosbeak	R
American goldfinch	C	Ruby-throated hummingbird	O
Blue jay	C	Western kingbird	H
White-breasted nuthatch	U	Purple martin	H
Eastern screech owl	H	Northern oriole	O
Ring-necked pheasant	R	American robin	R
House sparrow (exotic)	C	Chipping sparrow	R
European starling (exotic)	C	Lincoln's sparrow	O
Downy woodpecker	C	Barn swallow	H
Hairy woodpecker	U	Chimney swift	H
Red-bellied woodpecker	U	Brown thrasher	U
<i>Winter and/or spring or fall migration</i>		Rufous-sided towhee	H
Brown creeper	H	Yellow warbler	H
Purple finch	U	Yellow-rumped warbler	H
Sharp-shinned hawk	H	Red-headed woodpecker	R
Dark-eyed junco	C	House wren	H
Golden-crowned kinglet	H	Common yellowthroat	H
Ruby-crowned kinglet	H		
Red-breasted nuthatch	O		
Pine siskin	O		
Harris' sparrow	C		
White-crowned sparrow	U		
White-throated sparrow	U		
Cedar waxwing	H		
C = common at feeders; O = occasional; U = uncommon; R = rare; H = use backyard habitat but not feeders. Note that feeder use may vary widely depending on what habitat is nearby, location in the state, and other factors			

Dealing With Nuisance Wildlife

At times, some animals become a nuisance or cause problems in backyards. Raccoons may raid garbage cans, squirrels may rob bird feeders, rabbits may eat garden vegetables, birds get out of place, and snakes repel some people.

Exclude them

Generally, the surest and most permanent solution is to exclude the animal from the problem area. Tight fitting and secured garbage can lids, squirrel or predator guards on bird feeders, and fencing the garden to exclude rabbits are all effective. Remove nest boxes in winter so squirrels cannot use them, and close

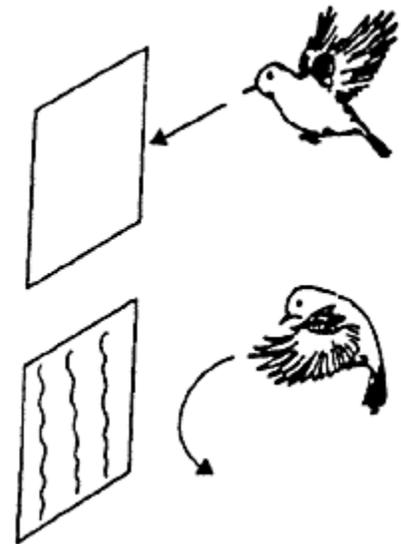
holes and repair damaged louvers in the attic so squirrels cannot get in. Also, check around the house foundation and close any holes or repair worn caulking, especially where service pipes or wires enter the house.

Snakes

Snake problems can be handled by removing hiding places such as boards, rock piles, wood piles, and high weeds from near the house. These provide shelter for snakes, and they tend to remain near them. Capturing and removing snakes or keeping a hoe or club handy to dispatch them when appropriate are other options. Remember, however, that snakes eat insects, earthworms, and mice, and are an important part of the natural environment. If they are not causing problems, it's best to leave them alone.

Birds striking windows

Birds sometimes strike windows because they don't see the glass or, during nesting season, because they see their reflection in the glass and want to drive the "intruder" out of their territory. American robins and cardinals are two species that sometimes attack their reflection in windows during spring. Many species strike windows throughout the year, but especially during migration, when they don't see the glass in time. One published study estimated that over 97 million birds collide with windows each year. A recent 3.5-year study on the University of Nebraska campus in Lincoln found 622 window-killed birds representing 72 species, an average of one dead bird found per day. And not all were found. The peak months were May and October, times when migrating birds and young may be less familiar with window locations.



Placing sheer cloth or netting in front of the window breaks the reflection and the open-flight-path appearance but retains much use of the window. Taping crinkled plastic wrap onto the glass has a similar function. Another approach is to hang cloth or aluminum foil strips in front of the window, or to plant shrubs. Placing hawk or owl silhouettes in the window to frighten birds has only limited effectiveness. Remove the covering when the bird changes behavior and is no longer a problem.

Woodpeckers

Occasionally woodpeckers peck small holes in wooden outside walls of houses. Often, this occurs with composition siding where the attraction is certain insect larvae sheltered in imperfections or small open areas in the composition wood. Controlling the insects at this time is not effective. For the long-term, one suggestion is to coat the wood with a water sealer to seal the small holes; the wood can then be painted a suitable color. For immediate relief, frighten the woodpeckers with sounds or visual devices. Aluminum foil strips or pie tins that blow, clank, and reflect light are usually helpful. Also, a shaving mirror with the large-image side toward the woodpecker has been effective, apparently because the mirror reflects the image of a larger woodpecker.

Overall

Animal problems in the backyard can usually be handled safely and effectively. For more help, check with your local Cooperative Extension office for NebGuides or other information on specific topics.

Additional Tips

Leave Some Leaves

During fall clean-up time, try to leave some leaves under shrubs or in other spots where they won't cover your lawn grass and where birds can find them. Leaf litter makes a great spot where birds such as rufous-sided towhees, Harris' sparrows, and others can forage for insects, seeds, and other foods.

Brush Pile

A brush pile will provide winter shelter and foraging sites for birds, and often adds interest to an out-of-the-way backyard spot. After Christmas, add a Christmas tree or two. If left up through summer, some backyard brush piles will attract nesting birds.



Pesticides

Use lawn or garden pesticides only when needed. Remember that insects are an important food for birds and that some native broad-leaf plants ("weeds") are needed as habitat for butterfly larvae and as bird foraging sites.

Backyard Journal

Keeping a few notes in a backyard bird journal about what happens in your yard can be a fun and rewarding adventure. Over time, you will have a great record of what to expect and when. Examples of things to include might be what birds come, what season or time of day they first show up, favorite plants or places in your landscape, where and how long they feed, what foods they like, behavior such as who chases whom, and sounds you hear. You might also note your thoughts or feelings about the wildlife you see and your experiences. A backyard journal can help tailor landscape or feeding programs in other years. It can also be a unique learning exercise and a great activity to do with children or as a family.

For More Information

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