

Backyard Birding Guides

#7 - Problems at the Bird Feeder

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Eventually anyone who has quite a few feeders will develop problems with the feeders. Some problems will need to be dealt with, others can be ignored. This bulletin will examine some of the more common problems that can arise around bird feeders in Kansas and some tips to resolve those problems.

Sanitation

When birds spend a considerable amount of time in a concentrated setting, the potential for transmitting diseases between birds greatly increases. Salmonella is commonly associated with poorly maintained feeders. Aspergillosis is a fatal avian respiratory disease associated with moldy feeds in warm weather. Other less common diseases can also occur.

One of the best ways to reduce these problems is through sanitation. Regular cleaning of the feeders is recommended. If you feed in the winter only and bring in the feeders in the summer, then a good cleaning at the start of the season and in mid-winter may be sufficient. If you feed year around, then cleaning every three months is recommended. To clean a bird feeder empty feed from the feeder. Wash it well with soapy water. Rinse well to remove all soap residue. Follow up with a disinfectant solution of four ounces of chlorine bleach in one gallon of water. With wooden feeders scrub the feeder with this solution. Set the feeder in the sun to dry. The sun will help kill bacteria.

Once or twice a season, clean up the spilled seed and seed hulls. These can be composted or discarded. The clean-up will help reduce mold problems and also reduce the likelihood of excessive mouse, vole, rat and other small rodent problems.

Good housekeeping, which includes sweeping and disposing of excess droppings, also will go a long ways in reducing disease problems at feeders. The use of covered feeders to keep seed dry will help reduce health problems.

Problem Animals

Other animals in both our rural and urban environments will find the foods we put out for the birds attractive; they may even find the birds themselves attractive. An occasional rabbit, squirrel or raccoon may seem cute, but when their presence is "in excess" or they become destructive, something has to be done!

Attempts to kill or remove the offending animal seldom last for any length of time. Since the good habitat and good food source attracted the animal, a new animal will usually move in quickly to the niche that was vacated by the one you removed.

Squirrels

While some people relish the idea of having squirrels at their feeders, others despise them with a passion. Squirrels can become domineering at feeders and will spend hours stuffing themselves

and keeping birds away. Efforts to keep them from getting to the feeders usually only serve to prove how ingenious and resourceful squirrels can be.

Often, you can keep them out of feeders by using ears of corn in a variety of squirrel feeders to deter them away from the bird food. Do not place a loose ear out - it will quickly be carried away. An eye bolt screwed into the shank end of the ear and attached to a length of lightweight chain will usually keep the ear of corn from disappearing.

One method being used increasingly to discourage mammals from eating bird feed is ground chile peppers. Ground cayenne pepper, not chili powder, mixed with the feed or on the feed will literally give the squirrel a hot mouth. Birds have different taste receptors on their tongue - chile pepper does not have the same affect for them. One commercial product, called *Squirrel Away*, is simply non-food quality ground hot peppers.

Raccoons, Opossums and Skunks

Raccoons, opossums, even skunks, will show up around feeders. Skunks will normally be interested in insects, worms, grubs or small rodents attracted to the spilled seed. Regular cleaning up of the spilled seed will usually solve this problem.

Opossums can be attracted to feed, especially sunflower seeds. While they may not actually consume very much feed, the biggest problem is their habit of defecating in the feeder. The droppings tend to discourage birds from using the feeder. Fortunately opossums are not as resourceful as raccoons and can be fairly easily excluded from feeders. The pepper treatment is also quite effective in discouraging them.

Raccoons, which can be very destructive, are attracted to a number of food sources. Some homeowners resort to bringing in all their feeders every night to protect them from raccoons. Raccoons have an aversion to getting greasy, so using a lithium grease to grease support poles or access to feeders may be successful. Perhaps a better alternative is to use the chile pepper

products. Specific feeding of raccoons should be avoided. One "cute" raccoon can quickly become

a half dozen nuisance raccoons that won't run away when you walk out the door.

Other wildlife that may be attracted to your feeders include deer and fox. These will seldom be a problem. Occasionally coyotes or bobcats may appear in more rural areas, but they are merely looking for birds or rodents.

Cats

Cats around the feeders are one of the most common problems backyard bird watchers experience. Many cat owners do not realize the damage their cats may do. The general estimate is that tame and feral cats together kill in excess of 4 million birds a day!

Cats are quiet, stealthy animals. This is what makes them such efficient hunters. Anything that can be done to make them less quiet will increase the odds that birds will be able to avoid them. A collar with bells or tags is effective in reducing a cat's success rate and pose little risk to the cat itself. If the cat is not your own, but a neighbor's, it can create a delicate situation that may or may not be resolved. If the cat is truly feral then live trapping and turning the cat over to a local humane society or animal shelter is the best course of action.

Making sure that there is plenty of cover to escape into is helpful to the birds, but unfortunately the cat can also use this cover to camouflage its approach to the feeders. In general, more cover is better and more attractive to the birds. Responsible pet ownership is the best hope.

Birds of Prey

One of the most difficult concepts for backyard bird watchers to accept is that the birds coming to their feeders are part of a natural ecosystem in which survival is a day to day requirement. The natural ecosystem requires survival of the fittest and predators are present to keep populations in check and to eliminate the old, sick and infirmed.

Eventually, you will have a bird of prey visit your backyard. Sharp-shinned Hawks are common around bird feeders. Less common, but not unexpected, include Cooper's Hawks, Red-tailed Hawks, Merlins, Peregrine and Prairie Falcons and Northern Goshawks.

When you have a raptor visit your backyard, please don't be upset. You are a fortunate visitor to part of the natural drama of the local ecosystems. Observe the hawk like you do the other birds and enjoy their beauty, strength and incredible flying abilities.

Cover in the form of bushes and trees provides protection for the songbirds. Evergreens and bushes with lots of fine multiple stems provide the best protection from these aerial attackers for the songbirds .

Where are the birds?

Occasionally, a homeowner will become perplexed by the lack of birds at their feeders. There can be many causes for this.

Excessive human activity in the immediate vicinity may deter birds from coming and feeling comfortable. The lack of natural cover in the form of trees and shrubs may leave the birds feeling unprotected. Landscaping that will provide cover and screening from human activities will help correct this problem.

Many bird species won't come to feeders when there are other "natural" food sources available. Birds may show up at feeders for a few days after a snowstorm and then, once the snow starts to melt, the birds are gone. Often, natural food supplies may last into January and February. Time will eventually draw the birds to your feeders.

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