

## **Feeding your feathered friends**

One of our team is a keen birdwatcher and tells us that with the dark cold night's and a definite chill in the daytime air, it is really important to remember that our feathered friends need help to stay warm.

Read on for lots of interesting information, hints and tips as shared by Mark to help our feathered friends!

### **All sizes.....**

Jenny Wrens, one of the UK's smallest birds, only weighs as much as a £1 coin and due to its size and increased surface area, it can lose as much as 20% of their body weight on a cold winter's night. Though interestingly, they have come up with an ingenious way of staying warm with over 61 counted in one nest box in Norfolk back in 1969!! Incidentally, a gathering of Wrens is called a 'Herd'!

### **Keeping you entertained and giving them the right food!**

Feeding birds is not just important for them, but also a great source of entertainment for us humans. As the temperature beings to drop, there has never been a better time to cosy up with a nice warm drink and watch the action unfurl! I liken it to the aeroplanes stacking to



land at Heathrow when I look out of the window from my house and see all the birds in the tree near my feeders, waiting for their allotted time to feed. Tempers do flare and there are definitely those species that are the more dominant ones, commonly the smallest ones, but then, isn't that often the case?

Different species of birds prefer different types of food and for it to be in different places, not just in a bird feeder. Blackbirds and Thrushes for example, generally like to feed on the floor and do a sterling job clearing up all the bits of food thrown out by the birds hanging off the feeders. You can also treat them with windfallen apples which Blackbirds and Thrushes love.

Blue tits, Great tits, and the like, prefer hanging off feeders looking for their preferred morsels, generally sunflower hearts, and millet. They are also partial to hanging upside down from a special feeder full of fat balls. These fat balls are laden with high energy seed key to keeping them going through the night. You can of course make your own fat balls but for all the mess it makes, I prefer to buy them. If you do decide to make them with your children, do just be mindful of the hot fat and the type of fat you use. We do not want to give the birds anything that might go rancid and make them poorly. There are plenty of recipes to be found on-line to help you do this.



Some birds really like specialist feed, you always get one! Goldfinches for example are very partial to Nyjer seeds. Nyjer seeds are harvested from thistles, a natural food source that

Goldfinches would ordinarily forage on. Not only are they high in energy, but these little seeds are also very messy!

I prefer to buy a bird food which is very low in wheat. Wheat is often used to bulk the feed out as it is inexpensive, but from experience, most of it gets thrown out, much to the enjoyment of ground feeding pheasants and wood pigeons. It does not go to waste and your ground feeders still will not go hungry with a wheatless feed!

### **Watching out for predators**

So, I use one of those metal feed poles with multiple hanging points but, a tree with lots of branches would work just as well if not better. When looking to site your feeding stations, do make sure it is near to a hedge or something that will provide protection from an opportunistic Sparrow Hawk or cat. It will provide a safe refuge until the threat has passed. I have three feeders on mine, one of which is for the fat balls.



### **Uninvited guests**

You may also want to purchase some plastic baffles which attach on your pole under the feeders. These work well in dissuading Squirrels from popping in for an easy meal. Squirrels will not only increase how often you must fill the feeders and therefore cost you more money but, they can also damage feeders as their teeth can easily chew through plastic and thin metal wire as they are very persistent in ensuring that they get fed. Do not worry though, there is plenty of natural food for them to find and, squirrels are very adept at storing acorns to see them through the winter.

### **Cleanliness is next to godliness.....**

Regular cleaning of your feeders is key but once the birds are used to visiting your feeding station, you will either need to be quick or have enough feeders in order to be able to rotate them and not leave a gap. Believe it or not, birds congregating on feeders is actually quite a stressful activity for them. Many birds are solitary and very territorial, coming together at a feeding station is more out of necessity than anything else and with the heightened stress it brings, it actually lowers their immune system and allows naturally occurring parasites to thrive. This is the main reason to keep your feeders clean which can be done by taking them to pieces and soaking them in sterilising solution, thoroughly washing them out and then allowing them to dry before refilling. You may also wish to move your feeding station around over the course of winter, do not move it too far away from where it was because the birds will be used to it but, move it just enough to give you clear ground and break any parasitic cycle building up on the ground beneath. Without any hosts, they will soon die off. It is also a good idea to bring in any food that you might have on the floor so as not to encourage any four-legged rodents to take up residence!!

### **Water – a source of life!**

As much as it is important to make sure we feed our birds, it is just as important to make sure that they have fresh water daily. Over winter, pools of water tend to freeze over, but

birds still need to drink regularly. Ensuring you provide fresh drinking water will really help them as will giving them somewhere to cosy up on those cold winter's days and nights.

### **A good night's rest.....**

Often people think that nest boxes are only for spring and summer and the breeding season but, they have just as an important role to play over winter when they act as shelter. Ideally in October, you would have cleaned your nest boxes out of any nesting material from this year's breeding season. The reason you do this is because the nesting material harbours harmful parasites, and we do not want to give them any reason to spread.

### **Winter migration....**

It used to be said that if the hawthorns were heavy with berries then, this was a sign of a cold winter. Many species from Northern Europe, make their way to the UK when the weather in their country really turns nasty. With large flocks of Fieldfares and Waxwings clearing trees of their fruits before moving on. It does not just stop with Fieldfares and the like. Many of our common garden birds you might think are with you year-round, but you would be wrong. In many cases, as our weather changes and gets colder, our garden birds move south to warm climates and are replaced by our European neighbours.



### **Research and resources.....**

There are so many useful resources and articles that can be found with a bit of simple research. They give you hints and tips on what to feed and what not to feed our birds but also how to get the most out of the experience. I would strongly advice anyone reading this, to do just that. And lastly, sit back, relax, and enjoy the spectacle unravelling in front of you in the warmth of your own home knowing, that your feathered friends will be going to roost with a full tummy!!

<https://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/natures-home-magazine/birds-and-wildlife-articles/features/what-do-birds-eat-at-christmas/>