

# Backyard Birdfeeders – Reference Material

Samantha Krause, MSc student

Dec 3, 2019

## Seed Types

- Select your seed type based on what birds you WANT at your feeders, what birds you do NOT want at your feeders, or what birds are in your area.



- **Black oil sunflower seeds** (shelled or unshelled)
  - Widely available, low-to-mid price point, easy storage
  - Birds: black-capped chickadee, red-breasted nuthatch, blue jay, house finch, common redpoll, pine siskin, dark-eyed junco, American tree sparrow, house sparrow



- **Peanuts** (shelled)
  - Widely available, mid price point, easy storage
  - Birds: black-capped chickadee, red-breasted nuthatch, blue jay, house finch, downy woodpecker, northern flicker
  - (most birds will eat this fatty legume if they're able to access them)



- **Peanuts** (in-shell)
  - Widely available, mid price point, easy storage
  - Birds: blue jay, black-billed magpie, northern flicker



- **Nyjer**
  - Less available but findable, high price point, careful storage required
  - Birds: house finch, common redpoll, pine siskin
  - (sparrows will snack too if able to access)



- **Suet**
  - Widely available, mid price point, easy storage
  - Birds: downy woodpecker, northern flicker, blue jay, black-capped chickadee, red-breasted nuthatch, magpie (if they can access it)
  - (most birds will snack if they can access it)

- **Millet/wheat/cracked corn** <- usually part of "mixed seed"
  - Not recommended by Sam!
  - Widely available, low price point, can contain toxins
  - Birds: dark-eyed junco, house sparrow (not their favourite)
  - (most birds will eat other seeds before millet)



- **Mixed seed**
  - Not Sam's favourite seed
  - Usually mostly "filler" seeds like millet, wheat, and cracked corn. Most birds are looking for seeds with higher fat/protein content (e.g. black oil sunflower seeds or peanuts) to offset the energetic cost of being cold

## Birdfeeders

- **Fly-through/platform**
  - Great starter bird feeder, will require filling almost daily.
  - All birds welcome! (This can be a pro or a con depending if your neighbourhood is filled with "bossy" magpies or not. If you want to make it harder for the magpies to take



over your backyard, avoid this kind of feeder. But know that blue jays and starlings like this kind of feeder too!).

- All seed types.

- **Hopper/silo**



- A “typical” hexagonal feeder; great starter bird feeder.
- A bit more difficult for larger birds to land. But if the ledges are still wide enough, blue jays might still be able to visit.
- Depending on the style, most seed-types will still fit (not in-shell peanuts).

- **Tube**

- Generally some kind of plastic/glass tube with small holes and perches for smaller birds.
- Watch your seed sizes, shelled peanuts are probably too large.
- Smaller seeds welcome – black oil sunflower (in shell or shelled), nyjer (finches), and certain varieties of mixed seed
- Depending on style, prevents larger birds from visiting (e.g. magpies, starlings).

- **Cage (suet)**



- Usually setup to attract woodpeckers, but also a style enjoyed by chickadees and nuthatches. Other birds will snack if they can reach it (e.g. blue jays).
- The basic cage and suet cakes work just as well as the fancy versions, but the style that requires birds to hang upside down will help keep suet fresh and limit visitors to woodpeckers, chickadees and nuthatches

- **Screen/mesh**

- Different sizes of screen available for different sizes of seeds and birds
- Most common are for black-oil sunflower seed, nyjer seed, (and peanuts)
- Mimics a bird landing on a tree trunk – MANY birds can fit and aren’t limited to perch availability. Limits what birds can visit: prevents unwanted birds like starlings and magpies, but also prevents blue jays and sparrows from visiting.
- Chickadees, nuthatches, and finches love these feeders

- **Peanut feeders**

- Varieties available for both shelled and in-shell peanuts.
- Screen/tube-style are loved by woodpeckers, chickadees and nuthatches
- Styles that hold in-shell will attract blue jays (and magpies)

- **Extras**

- Window-mounted
  - Can be tricky to find a model that won’t fall off! (Lee-Valley has a great one)
  - Lots of fun for viewing, and reduces window-strikes
- Combination platforms
  - If you’re limited on space, you can look for platform-type feeders that also hold seeds (like a silo) and suet.
- Finch socks
  - Cheap starter option if you’d like to try feeder finches nyjer seeds without making a larger initial investment.
- Ground
  - Some birds prefer to feed from the ground (especially sparrows), so providing a platform feeder can be a good compromise if you don’t want a mess.



- **BONUS: Water**
  - If you can provide a constant fresh water source, MANY birds will visit your backyard.
  - Heated birdbath
  - It's hard for birds to find fresh water in the winter – any puddles usually are contaminated with rock salt and will dehydrate them.

### **Bird species around Lethbridge**

- Visit the Cornell Lab of Ornithology website and enter the bird names in the search bar for photos, recordings, and more information on all the species listed here.  
<https://www.birds.cornell.edu/home/>
- Rock pigeon, Eurasian-collared dove
  - Feeder: fly-through/platform
  - Seed: cracked corn, wheat
- Downy woodpecker, (Hairy woodpecker), Northern flicker
  - Feeder: suet, hanging (shelled) peanut feeders
  - Seed: suet, peanuts
- Black-billed magpie, (American Crow)
  - Feeder: fly-through/platform, (suet – if accessible)
  - Seed: peanuts, suet, (anything yummy)
- Blue jay
  - Feeder: fly-through/platform, hanging peanut (in-shell), larger tube/silo
  - Seed: peanuts, suet, black oil sunflower
- Black-capped chickadee, Red-breasted nuthatch, (White-breasted nuthatch)
  - Feeder: fly-through/platform, suet, hanging peanut, tube, silo, screen
  - Seed: black oil sunflower, shelled peanuts, suet
- European starling
  - Feeder: fly-through/platform, larger silo
  - Seed: black oil sunflower, shelled peanut, (suet)
- Dark-eyed junco, (American tree sparrow)
  - Feeder: fly-through/platform, silo, tube, ground (preferred)
  - Seed: black oil sunflower, (nyjer), (millet)
- House finch
  - Feeder: fly-through/platform, silo, tube, screen/mesh
  - Seed: black oil sunflower, nyjer, suet
- Common redpoll, Pine siskin
  - Feeder: fly-through/platform, silo, tube, screen/mesh, finch sock
  - Seed: black oil sunflower, nyjer
- House sparrow
  - Feeder: fly-through/platform, silo, ground (preferred)
  - Seed: black oil sunflower, (nyjer), millet
- **BONUS: Fruit eaters**
  - Bohemian waxwings
  - Cedar waxwings
  - American Robin

## Important Considerations

- **Your backyard**
  - Birds won't forage unless they feel safe enough. Your backyard *likely* needs to have some kind of tree or shrub for birds to visit. If your neighbours have large trees, that might be enough if you're strategic about your feeder placement.
  - A bare yard might not be able to attract any birds, even with the best feeders.
- **Feeder placement**
  - Again, think about providing cover or quick access to cover
- **Windows**
  - Place within 3-6 feet from a window to reduce fatal window strikes (birds can't fly fast enough on take-off to harm themselves)
  - OR place more than 30 feet from a window (birds are less likely to aim for the window)
  - Try your best to follow these guidelines. If you still get window strikes, try other feeder placements, get stickies for your window, or abandon feeders.
  - <https://www.allaboutbirds.org/news/why-birds-hit-windows-and-how-you-can-help-prevent-it/>
- **Experimentation required**
  - It might take some time to find the perfect placement for your feeders – don't be discouraged! Keep experimenting with different locations, feeder types, and seeds to attract your local birds.
- **"Build it and they will come"**
  - Don't worry, the birds WILL find your feeders! They can smell seeds.
  - Once you see one kind of bird, more are on the way. Birds attract birds.
- **Attracting/"calling" birds**
  - If you are impatient, and if there are chickadees in your neighbourhood, you can try "calling" them to your backyard
    1. Play a chickadee mobbing call from a portable speaker placed under your bird feeder
    2. Only play for ~30s a few times
    3. As soon as one chickadee lands on or very near your feeder, turn off the call
    4. Wait for the birds to calm down – the chickadees now know there's food available and will come back
  - DO NOT AGGRIVATE THE BIRDS BY CALLING FOR A LONG TIME, OR CONTINUING TO CALL ONCE THEY HAVE FOUND THE FEEDER.
- **Seasonal**
  - Feeding birds is generally a winter activity. You CAN offer seeds in the summer, but there is plenty of other food available.
  - If you can provide fresh water all year-round, you'll be a hot spot even without seeds.
  - Some people feel feeding in the spring/summer is NOT a good idea because it can alter the breeding behaviour.

- **Commitment**
  - Birds come to rely on your birdfeeder as the weather gets colder. If you start a bird feeder, be prepared to keep it going until the spring. If you go on holidays, ask your neighbour to fill your feeder while you're gone.
- **Price**
  - Some seeds are pricier than others, consider the winter-long commitment when deciding what feeders and seed to provide.
- **Care**
  - Birdfeeders require cleaning – at LEAST once a year, but more often is better!
  - If it looks like something is growing in your feeder, it probably is!
  - Clean with weak bleach or vinegar solution
- **Seed storage**
  - Keep seeds in dry location. Some seeds spoil/mould quickly in damp conditions. Nyjer seeds are of particular concern because the mould is fatal to songbirds.
- **Cats**
  - Difficult situation! (I am also a cat owner)
  - Protective cover for birds, can also offer stalking opportunities for cats
  - If there are cats that visit your backyard, take the time to observe their strategies and behaviour, and adjust your feeder positions/design/type to make their hunting more difficult. (E.g. birds can fly through wooden lattice, but cats cannot.)
  - A bit a reassurance: Recent studies suggest the estimates of cat-related bird fatalities are inflated, and the species removed by cats are typically not those suffering population declines.
  - If you can, keep your cat inside or in a “catio” <- (fun to google!)
  - Bells do not work (cats are too good!), but there IS a new product available that has potential: <https://www.birdsbesafe.com/>
- **Addictive!**
  - Be prepared to invest more time and money than you thought you would! 😊
- **Great birding practice**
  - Identifying and observing the birds in your backyard can be GREAT birding practice!
  - There are only a few species you could be seeing, which makes the process of elimination much easier than in the spring.
  - Learn the typical behaviours of the species in your backyard to make them even easier to ID all year-round. This will also help your observation skills improve for spring-time birding
  - Binocular recommendation: 8x42 magnification
  - Field guide recommendation: Sibley field guide to Birds (All North America or just Western birds)
- **IF YOU LIKE BIRDING:**
  - Join local naturalist club and connect with local birders
  - Watch for bird-related events at the Helen Schuler Nature Centre
  - (Ask Suzanne for link to my previous “Bird watching 101” material.)
- **Watch a birdfeeder from your desk!**
  - Cornell lab of Ornithology feeder cams!
  - <https://www.allaboutbirds.org/cams/ontario-feederwatch/>