



10 Biggest Mistakes People Make In Backyard Birding And How To Avoid Them

Bird watching is one of the fastest growing forms of outdoor recreation in the country. Each year millions of people discover for the first time the joys of birdwatching. It's easy to understand why. **Birds are fun to watch!**

And you can watch them just about everywhere. The most convenient place to start is right in your own backyard. The key is not to make any of these common errors when you begin to attract birds to your backyard.

Some mistakes are worse than others.

Some can even be deadly for the birds.

Take a look through these top ten mistakes that many people make. Which mistakes are you making that could be holding you back from properly attracting birds to your backyard? By correcting them, you will greatly enhance your backyard birding.

The Top 10 Big Mistakes...

- 1. Not Enough Variety of Birds**
- 2. Feeding Station Mistakes**
- 3. Uninvited Guests at the birdfeeder**
- 4. Using Insecticides and Lawn Chemicals**
- 5. Nest Box Mistakes**
- 6. Bird Bath Mistakes**
- 7. Incorrect Bird House Placement**
- 8. Not Cleaning Feeders and Nesting Boxes**
- 9. Too many birds**
- 10. Not Landscaping for birds**

Mistake #1 Not Enough Variety of Birds

The species of birds you attract **is determined primarily by the seeds you offer**. The variety chosen will directly influence your visitors.

Black oil sunflower is the hands-down favorite of all the birds that visit tube feeders. The majority of songbirds will eat black oil sunflower seed and proso millet. The **common seed mixes have less of these seeds, so many people prefer to add extra quantities**.

Another all time favorite guaranteed to attract goldfinches, pine siskins, and purple finches, is thistle or niger and house type feeders.

White proso millet is favored by birds who visit platform feeders (doves and sparrows). Ducks, geese and quail will eat corn.

Many of the cereal grains (corn, milo, oats, canary, wheat, rape, flax and buckwheat) in mixed bird seeds are NOT favorites of birds that visit tube feeders.

Besides seed preferences, **most birds also have preferred feeding habits**: some are perchers like titmice and chickadees, while towhees, sparrows and doves prefer to scratch around on the ground. Some other species profit from a raised platform scattered with favorite seeds like millet, hulled sunflower, cracked corn, and peanut kernels. Birds found in this type of situation would include the grosbeaks, cardinal, bluejay, and most finches.

Watch a feeder filled with a seed mix and you'll see the birds methodically drop or kick out most of the seeds to get to their favorite -- sunflower. Birds will also kick out artificial "berry" pellets, processed seed flavored and colored to look like "real" fruit.

Seeds that wind up on the ground are likely to be contaminated by dampness and bird droppings. If the birds don't eat them, rodents will.

Fruit Feeding; An offering of fruit will lure birds that normally do not frequent feeders. To attract orioles, tanagers, yellow-rumped warblers, yellow-breasted chat, wrens, and grosbeaks, as well as the more common species, try apple and grape jelly, white-seedless grapes, orange and apple quarters and raisins. Fruit may be placed on a feeding platform or in a dish placed off the ground.

Offering liquid nectar, a mixture of table sugar and water, is a popular method of attracting hummingbirds. You can make your own hummingbird nectar by adding 1/4 cup of sugar to a cup of boiling water. **It is not necessary to color the water red to attract the birds.** The dye could be harmful to the hummingbirds. Just place your feeder near red flowers or buy a red hummingbird feeder. Remember, sugar water will ferment when left in the hot sun, turning nectar deadly. Do not put out a nectar feeder if you are not willing to clean it at least weekly, preferably twice a week.

The most effective way to attract the largest variety of birds to your yard is to put out separate feeders for each food:

- starling-resistant suet feeder
- a house feeder for sunflower seeds
- a bluebird feeder
- a wire mesh cage feeder for peanuts
- a nectar feeder
- a stationary or tray fruit feeder
- platform bird feeder for millet
- See www.a-home-for-wild-birds.com/bird-feeders.html for examples.

Mistake #2 Feeding Station Mistakes

Typical problems are:

- "wrong" birds at the feeder
- no birds at the feeder
- sick and injured birds
- predators, pests and
- the "mess."

Several factors determine which birds will visit your feeders: the type of feeder and seed you use, the presence of predators, and how often you sanitize your feeders.

Tossing a mix of seeds on the ground is an easy way to feed birds. Just about every seed-eating bird in your neighborhood will stop by. So will squirrels, chipmunks, mice and rats. Any bird can feed on the ground, but in the wild few birds other than turkeys and quail find all their food there. Contrary to popular wisdom, large birds like the cardinals and doves are not "ground feeding" birds per se.

All birds will use an elevated feeder. The larger birds, with their larger feet and bodies, require large perches. Cardinals and doves will visit tube feeders, if you add a tray.

And it's healthier for these songbirds to feed at a feeder, not on the ground. Any cage bird owner and zookeeper will tell you that the ground below bird roosts and feeders is not where you want your birds to dine. It's very difficult to sterilize the ground below your feeders.

So resist the temptation to toss food on the ground. Put it in a feeder where it's dry and protected from contamination. Regardless of which seed you use, store it in a metal garbage can in a cool, dry place. Seed will turn rancid when it sits in a hot garage or shed in the summer. To avoid insect infestations in warm weather, don't store more seed than you can use in a couple of weeks.

Put your feeder where the squirrels can't reach. Those cute little rodents seem to like sunflower and peanuts as much or more than acorns. Squirrels become a problem when they take over a bird feeder, scaring the birds

away, and tossing seed all over. What's worse... frustrated squirrels have been known to entertain themselves by chewing right through plastic and wooden feeders.

If you must hang a feeder, select a tube protected with metal mesh. Most plastic "squirrel-proof" feeders, despite manufacturers' claims, may eventually succumb to rodent teeth.

If you have the "right" situation in your yard, a pole with a baffle should suffice. Any wood or plastic feeder can be effective when mounted on a pole with a plastic or metal baffle, if the pole is at least 10 feet or more from a tree limb or trunk.

Once you've determined you're going to put your feeder, you're ready to go shopping. In addition to good looks, think about...

- ...how durable is it?
- ...will it keep the seeds dry?
- ...how easy is it to clean?
- ...how much seed will it hold?
- ...how many birds will it feed at one time?
- ...which species will use it?

Mistake # 3 Uninvited Guests At The Birdfeeder

Once you get your bird feeding station up and running, you may run into problems with uninvited guests. These visitors fall into two categories -- those interested in the seeds (squirrels and chipmunks, rats and mice, starlings and house sparrows), and those interested in a bird for dinner (cats and hawks).

If you have trees, you will get to know squirrels. You may marvel at their antics, until they take over your bird feeders. Then you'll either love them or hate them.

Those who love squirrels tolerate their visits, and may even encourage them with special squirrel toys and feeders.

When a squirrel is at the feeder, you're not likely to see birds. Squirrels will scare off the birds while they eat the seed, and sooner or later, they'll eat the feeder too.

The simplest solution is the squirrel-proof feeder or pole, and storing your seed in a metal garbage can. Squirrels will eat your bird seed and when they "feel" like it, damage your feeders.

That is, unless you use safflower seed. Put it in any feeder. Hang it anywhere. Squirrels don't seem to like safflower, yet.

Who eats safflower? Cardinals, doves, chickadees, titmice and house finches.

Want more bird variety? Use sunflower seeds. Birds are attracted to sunflower because of its high oil content. Some of that oil saturates the shell. If you don't remove the spent shells, rodents are attracted to the smell.

The obvious solution is to rake up the shells. An easier way to eliminate the shell problem is to use hulled sunflower (also known as sunflower hearts or chips).

You can "squirrel-proof" any feeder by putting it on a pole with a baffle (the underside lathered with Vaseline and hot pepper) about ten feet from a squirrel-jumping off point.

Chipmunks, rats and mice can also become a problem where there's seed spillage under the feeder. Don't use mixed bird seed, and if you don't have a squirrel problem, add a feeder tray.

Crow, house sparrow and starling problems can be eliminated by seed and feeder selection.

Cats are another story altogether. Feral cats and your neighbor's tabby are a serious threat to nestlings, fledglings and roosting birds. Too often, the presence of just one cat on the prowl near your feeder can take the enjoyment out of your backyard bird watching experience.

When a cat sits drooling under your feeder, you're not likely to see any birds. You're bound to feel much worse when you find a pile of feathers on the ground.

If your neighbor has a cat and is reasonable, suggest a bell collar. If that doesn't work, consider getting yourself a pet -- a dog. Birds don't seem to be bothered by most dogs, but cats and squirrels are.

If there are no cats in your neighborhood and you find a pile of feathers near your feeder, look for a hungry hawk perching on a tree nearby.

Don't get upset. Consider yourself fortunate to see one, right in your backyard. Cooper's and sharp-shinned hawks eat birds and play an important role in the natural community.

Don't put out poisons, or try to trap them, since all birds of prey -- eagles, owls and hawks -- are protected by Federal law.

Mistake #4 Using Insecticides and Lawn Chemicals

This is a huge mistake. Not only for the birds, but your **kids and pets!**

If you attract birds to your yard, keep in mind that many herbicides, insecticides and fertilizers are deadly poisons.

Ornithologists have known for several years that many lawn-care chemicals kill songbirds and contaminate their food. Fortunately there are mechanical and biological techniques that are provide less hazardous pest control options. Currently, **homeowners use up to 10 times more chemical pesticides per acre on their lawns than farms and spend more per acre, on average, to maintain their lawns than farmers spend per acre on crops.**

Many people are concerned about the effect of pesticide sprays on their food, yet give no thought to what is being applied on their lawns and its potential hazards:

Homeowners have many opportunities to lessen the impact of pesticides on birds and minimize bird deaths. They can practice pest prevention:

- Plant native vegetation
- Use non-chemical controls www.a-home-for-wild-birds.com/organic-fertilizer-sea-vegetables.html

You can eat Lucky Charms, rub the buddha's belly, check your feng shui and hope these chemicals in your backyard won't matter...**or you can select the right type of NON-CHEMICAL CONTROLS - at the lowest price.**

For more information go to www.a-home-for-wild-birds.com/effects-of-lawn-pesticides.html

You can eat Lucky Charms, rub the buddha's belly, check your feng shui and hope these chemicals in your backyard won't matter to the birds, your kids and pets....**or you can select the right type of NON-CHEMICAL CONTROLS - at the lowest price.**

Mistake #5 Bird Nest Box Mistakes

Many homeowners invite birds to nest in their yards by putting up nesting boxes. Almost two dozen species will consider a human-made nest.

How do you make sure the "right" animal is using your bird nest?

Learn all you can about the birds you want to attract; (learn more at www.a-home-for-wild-birds.com/bird-houses.html) and offer them a box that opens at the top **and** the front or side. Monitor the nest box, and evict starlings and house sparrows.

The safest solution to insect infestations is physical removal and soaping the inside top of the box. If insects infest the box during nesting, apply a light dusting of rotenone or pyrethrin. **Do not use chemical sprays.**

If snakes and climbing mammals are a problem, use physical barriers to deter them. Try a PVC pipe over your metal bird house pole, or metal sheeting on a tree or wood pole. Smear the PVC or metal with Vaseline laced with hot (cayenne) pepper. **Avoid automotive grease, it can be lethal to wildlife.**

Put a predator guard over the nest entrance hole.

Do not use bird houses with perches below the entrance hole.

If you find birds attacking the adults, eggs or nestlings, what you can do depends on the perpetrators. Eliminate house sparrows and starlings. All other birds are protected by federal and state laws. You may not harass or otherwise harm hawks, owls, falcons, crows, grackles, jays and shrikes.

Mistake #6 Bird Bath Mistakes

Water attracts more bird species than any feeder or nest box.

A source of fresh water is important in the spring and summer. Bird baths will be used for both bathing and drinking. **Dripping water seems to be particularly attractive to birds.**

Bird baths can become bird problems when they're too deep (small birds can drown in three inches of water) or dirty (birds drink, bathe and defecate at a bath).

Hose out the bath daily and wash it with hot, soapy water at least once a week. Add liquid bleach to the soapy water to help kill algae and bacteria.

Winter is even a more important time to offer water. There's no easy way to keep water from freezing. Contrary to some reports in the popular media, **glycerin and antifreeze will kill birds.**

The only way to keep water from freezing is to add an electric water warmer. More info at www.a-home-for-wild-birds.com/bird-bath-heater.html

Be careful with electricity and water. Use a UL (Underwriters Laboratory) listed warmer, and connect your appliance to a GFIC (ground-fault interrupt circuit) outdoor socket.

Mistake #7 Incorrect Bird House Placement

Where you put your bird house is as important as its design and construction. Cavity nesting birds are very particular about where they live. No matter how perfect your nest box, if you don't have the right habitat, the birds aren't likely to find it.

Not everyone has the habitat for a wood duck, purple martin, or screech owl. On the other hand, just about anyone can attract a robin, titmouse, wren, or chickadee.

Let's assume you've built or bought the "perfect" house. You put it out in your backyard in February. Months pass, and not one bird has landed on it. What's wrong?

It may be that you don't have the right habitat, or it may be where you put the house.

There's lots you can do to modify your land to attract the birds you want to see. It can be as simple as putting out a bird bath or as complicated as planting fruit-bearing shrubs or installing a pond with a waterfall.

But it's much easier just to identify the birds most likely to take to your backyard as it is and put the appropriate nest box in the right place.

Should you hang it from a tree limb, nail it to a fence, or mount it on a pole or a tree trunk?

There's a wide range between how high and low you can place a nest box. Pick a height that's convenient for you. After all, you'll want to watch what goes on and keep the box clean. If you want to watch chickadees from your second floor window or deck, fifteen feet is not unreasonable but it's a lot easier to clean out a box at eye level.

Here are some tips on where to put bird houses:

- Houses mounted on metal poles are less vulnerable to predators than houses nailed to tree trunks or hung from tree limbs.

- Use no more than four small nest boxes for any one species or one large box per acre.
- Put about 100 yards between bluebird boxes and 75 yards between swallow boxes (if you have both species, "pair" the houses with one bluebird box 25 feet from a swallow box. Put the "pair" 100 yards away.)
- Don't put bird houses near bird feeders.
- Don't put more than one box in a tree, unless the tree is extremely large or the boxes are for different species.
- If you have very hot summers, face the entrance holes of your boxes north or east to avoid overheating the box.
- Where do you want to watch your birds? From a kitchen window... a sliding glass door opening on to a deck... a second story window?
- Also consider the "mess" factor. Pick a location where discarded bird droppings won't be a clean-up problem.

Mistake #8 Not Cleaning Feeders and Nesting Boxes

Any zookeeper and cage bird owner will tell you, when you feed birds in a confined area, you have to expect bird droppings, feathers, an occasional insect or two and left-over food mess.

While you don't have to wash the feeder daily, you should clean it regularly.

Diseases like salmonella can grow in moldy, wet seed and bird droppings in your feeder tray and on the ground below. It's a good idea to move your feeders (just a foot or so) each season to give the ground underneath time to assimilate the seed debris and bird droppings.

Keeping your feeders clean should not become a major undertaking. The degree of maintenance required is directly related to the types of birds you want to attract.

A thistle feeder for goldfinches should be cleaned about once a month depending on how often it rains. Feeding hummingbirds requires cleaning at the very least, weekly, preferably more often -- two or three times a week. Sunflower and suet feeders may need to be cleaned only once a month.

Feeders made of plastic, ceramic and glass are easy to clean. Wash them in a bucket of hot, soapy water fortified with a capful or two of chlorine bleach, then give them a run through your dishwasher.

Use the same regimen with wood feeders, but substitute another disinfectant for the bleach so your wood won't fade.

Mistake #9 Too Many Birds

If too many birds at your feeder becomes a problem, you can control their numbers by putting out smaller amounts of seed, by using specialty seeds, or by using restrictive feeders.

If you fill your feeder only when it's empty, the birds will look for food elsewhere. They'll return as long as you continue to fill it.

You can virtually eliminate visits by birds you'd rather not see by offering seeds they won't eat. Be selective in your choice of seeds.

If you use more than one type of seed, put them in separate feeders. This will reduce wasted seeds, as birds will toss unwanted seeds out of a feeder to get to their favorites.

Birds that visit your feeder have very specific preferences. Most prefer sunflower. Some prefer millet. A few prefer peanuts. None seem to prefer the other grains used in the mixes: corn, milo, red millet, oats, wheat and canary seed.

If you want to feed only cardinals, doves and white-throated sparrows, switch from black oil sunflower to safflower. If you want only finches and an occasional dove and white-throated sparrow, try niger thistle. If you want only jays, titmice and white-throated sparrows, try peanuts.

Another way to discourage unwanted birds is to use specialty feeders that for the most part, allow only "select" birds to feed. The most non-selective feeders are the tray, platform or house feeders.

You can encourage small birds with feeders that restrict access. Wood feeders with vertical bars and feeders covered with wire mesh frustrate the larger birds.

Tube feeders without trays also restrict access to small birds. Remove the perches, and you've further selected only those birds capable of clinging -- finches, chickadees, titmice and woodpeckers.

Add vertical perches to tube thistle feeders, and you'll limit accessibility primarily to the goldfinches. If starlings are a problem at your suet feeder, you can discourage them by using a suet feeder with access only at the bottom. **Starlings are reluctant to perch upside down.** Chickadees and woodpeckers don't find that a problem.

Mistake #10 Not Landscaping for Birds

As people learn to enjoy the beauty of birdlife around their home, they may wish to improve the "habitat" in their yard so that more birds will visit their property. You can attract birds by placing bird feeders, nest boxes, and bird baths in your yard, and by planting a variety of trees, shrubs, and flowers. These can provide good nesting sites, winter shelter, places to hide from predators, and natural food supplies that are available year-round

Food; Every bird species has its own unique food requirements, and these may change as the bird matures and as the seasons change. Learn the food habits of the birds you wish to attract. Then plant the appropriate trees, shrubs, or flowers that will provide the fruits, berries, grains, seeds, acorns, nuts, or nectar. More info at www.a-home-for-wild-birds.com/bird-garden.html

Water: You can probably double the number of bird species in your yard by providing a source of water. A frog pond, water garden, or bird bath will get lots of bird use, especially if the water is dripping, splashing, or moving.

Shelter: Birds need places where they can hide from predators and escape from severe weather. Trees (including hollow ones), shrubs, tall grass, and bird houses provide excellent shelter.

Diversify: The best landscaping plan is one that includes a wide variety of plants. This helps attract a greater number of bird species.

Remember the four seasons; It is necessary to provide birds with food and shelter during all four seasons of the year. Plant trees, shrubs, and flowers that will provide year-round food and shelter.

Protection: Habitat components need to be properly arranged. Consider the effects of prevailing winds (and snow drifting) so your yard will be protected from harsh winter weather.

Picture windows can be death traps for birds. A network of parallel, vertical strings spaced 4 inches apart can be placed on the outside of windows to prevent this problem.

Wishing you much success in your backyard birding!

Susan