

Encouraging birds to visit your garden



Over the past five years or so, bird song and seeing birds in the garden has become part of the joy of having a garden. Although we didn't realise it at first, it wasn't until we noticed that we were seeing fewer birds that we acknowledged how much we enjoyed them. We used to have a huge amount of sparrows and starlings in the garden, as well as a couple of greenfinches, a pair of collared doves, blue tits, blackbirds, robins, jackdaws and once even a sparrowhawk. Recently we noticed we were pretty much only seeing sparrows.



So we got to work on trying to figure out why they stopped visiting and there were a few reasons. We had assumed it was simple, our neighbours on more than one side had cut down all their large conifer trees, These used to encircle the garden giving safety and nesting places for the birds. Therefore it was a bit of a no-brainer that this was the reason. It turned out it wasn't that simple. Coincidentally at the same time the trees were cut down, we changed up the type of food and feeder we were using in the garden, so there were multiple changes which had an effect.



So here are our simple top 3 tips to encourage garden birds to visit your garden.

Tip 1. Provide a variety of food

This was perhaps the biggest surprise to us, that it wasn't enough just to put out a generic seed mix if you want a variety of birds in your garden. I had assumed that seed mixes were like a buffet and all the birds would find their favourite seeds and be happy.

What I didn't know was that different birds have different diets, apart from the obvious like eagles eat differently from sparrows of course. It's all to do with the birds' beaks. Some little garden birds (like robins) have narrow, pointy beaks, meaning they eat invertebrates like worms and insects, their beaks are for pecking. Others have strong, triangular beaks (like sparrows or finches) and these are suited to cracking open seed husks. The reason I mention this is

because we switched the food we were putting out for the birds from suet balls to seed mix. So suddenly all the little pointy beaked birds which had been visiting our garden (like the robin and blackbird) had no food to eat. This leads me on to the second tip.



Tip 2. Provide a variety of feeders

I mentioned that we used to hang out suet balls. This attracted a lot of starlings who are much bigger birds and shouty little buggers. The starlings loved the fat balls and would polish them off in an hour or so. However, we also noticed a couple of issues with this which is why we stopped putting them out. Firstly the starlings were right bullies and chased all the smaller birds away from the food. Secondly, the local magpies also loved the fat balls, and being bigger

again, they would steal whopping great chunks and then bury them in my veg beds, only for me to find out when weird and wonderful things grew.



The consequence of us stopping the fat balls though were that the little robins and blackbirds now had no food. They can't break open the seeds from the feeders and are ground feeding birds so can't cling onto the perches of the bird feeders. So they had been eating the broken bits of fat ball which fell on the floor. No fat balls, no scraps for the ground feeding birds, and only seeds in a hanging feeder.



So the solution is to not only have a variety of food like seeds, peanuts, mealworms, dehusked seeds (which the pointy beaked birds can eat) and fat balls or suet pellets but also don't just have hanging feeders, use some ground trays or a bird table to make it easier for the ground feeding birds.

Tip 3. Offer food in different parts of the garden

Similar to having different types of feeder, putting food in different areas helps as well. It means there is no worry about birds becoming territorial and scaring off other birds. Also, its good to have some food in less open areas for the more timid birds. But remember, make sure to keep feeders in a safe area, away from places where predators can hide or pounce.

So what type of food do different birds like?



Peanuts are a favourite with tits and finches. However, be sure to buy them from a reputable supplier to avoid toxins. Avoid salted peanuts as most birds cant process the salt and may die from ingesting too much.



Nyjer seeds again loved by finches. They are tiny though, so won't work in a standard feeder. Better for a bird table or

special nyjer seed feeder.

Suet balls (fat balls) are adored by great tits as well as sparrows, starlings and blackbirds.



Mixed seed is good for a whole host of birds but make sure you get a decent quality mix. Some suppliers mix it with lentils, beans, and rice to make up the weight. Also having de-husked seeds like sunflower seed hearts is good as the little birds can eat these.



A good thing to remember is that birds need water too, so a bird bath or even just a plate out in the garden where they can drink and bathe is great.