

Water for the Birds

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The rains have been well timed this summer so far, but anytime that the temperatures reach the mid-nineties the evaporation rate is high, and birds benefit by access to water from bird baths.

In addition to assisting the birds in your landscape, providing water will attract new individual birds and even new species to the yard. Place the water sources in locations where you can easily observe all the activity in the water and get your bird list and camera ready for action.

Bird baths are available on the market in many shapes and materials including concrete, fiber, plastic and metal. I like the masonry baths the best, but all of them work. For several years we used a garbage can cover that was especially popular with the large birds such as white-winged doves. Bird baths can be very functional and/or artistic.

In terms of "functional" the bird bath should start out shallow and gradually reach a depth of 2 to 3 inches. Deep birdbaths do not have to be refilled as much but they are less popular as a bathing site, especially for smaller birds like lesser goldfinches. The birdbaths made of masonry materials are less likely to heat up and they also provide better footing for the birds.

On the issue of evaporation, even the deepest bird baths will have to be rinsed and refilled at least once per day. That requirement is not all bad because it means that a normal birdbath will not be a viable egg-laying site for mosquitoes. It is important in protecting your family from mosquitoes to eliminate standing water situations where the water stagnates and lasts several days. Between evaporation and the splashing by bathing birds, the birdbath water does not stagnate or last more than a day.

In addition to placing the bird baths where you can observe them, place them in the open at least 8 ft from shrubs and other cover. Eight feet is close enough for the bathing birds to flee to if hawks pass by and it is far enough away that cats cannot use it as a hiding place to launch themselves at vulnerable bathing birds.

One bird bath will be popular but place 3 or more together and it will be even more fun to watch the activity. In a normal wooded San Antonio neighborhood expect at least 8 different species of birds to use the bath as a water source including cardinals, goldfinches, hummingbirds, mockingbirds, doves, and blue jays.

If you want to attract more individual birds and more species, make one or more of your birdbaths a water source with recirculating water. There are lots of choices including drippers that run off a hose spigot. Another technology that is easy to use and very effective is a "plug in recirculating pump" that you just set in the bird bath. The pump sends a short plume of water up that attracts the bird's attention. On hot days with lots of bird visits you may have to refill the birdbath 3 or 4 times, but it is worth it. Our plug-in recirculating mechanism is called a Granite Bubbler and was \$32.20 on Amazon. There was even a solar powered bubbler for about \$15. Your favorite retail nursery, feed store, wild bird supply retailer or pet supply store may also have an effective, inexpensive mechanism that will make your birdbath especially attractive to thirsty birds this summer.