

Bird Feeding Report

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The bird feeding situation has changed considerably since we last discussed it in October. The record low temps in mid-November eliminated most of the nectar producing blooms on plants such as mistflower, zinnias, cape honeysuckle, salvias, and lantanas. A large portion of the summer foliage was also frozen changing the availability of seeds and insects. The net result seems to be that insect-eating and seed-eating birds are easier to attract to bird feeders for observation. Here are some issues to consider.

Insect Eating Birds- Using suet blocks it is relatively easy to attract insect-eating birds to your feeders. Carolina wrens, Bewicks wrens, kinglets, orange crown warblers, and myrtle warblers don't have interest in seeds, but they will regularly visit suet blocks. Chickadees, titmice, woodpeckers, cardinals, and thrashers will take advantage of both insect and seed feeders.

Suet blocks are available in several sizes and various flavors. Pure suet (beef fat) is available but most versions include some seed and even fruit mixed in. I have become partial to suet blocks that are flavored with pepper. The advantage of the pepper flavored suet is that the squirrels do not like the taste. Hot pepper does not discourage the birds.

An especially effective product is a large (approx. 8 by 8 inches) seed block produced by "Mr. Bird," a local company that includes meal worms and pepper in the mix. It may or may not qualify as a suet product, but it has the same ability to attract the insect-eating birds. Recognize it and the pepper flavored suet blocks by their red color.

Hummingbirds- Based on reports from bird feeding gardeners it does not appear that there are as many rufous hummingbirds wintering in San Antonio as last year, but the numbers are high enough that it is worthwhile to maintain a sugar water feeder over the winter. Even if you don't attract a rufous hummingbird as a regular guest, golden-fronted woodpeckers, honey bees, and winter butterflies may take advantage of the sugar water. Mix one-part sugar with four parts water by volume.

Seed-Eaters- One of the goals with seed-feeding is to attract a good mix of birds to the feeders without being overwhelmed by white-winged doves, grackles, and squirrels.

A good first step is to obtain a seed-dispensing steel feeder that has a weight sensitive perch that closes when the squirrels or heavy birds land on it. Use it to provide sunflower seeds, the overall favorite bird seed. Another tactic is to use safflower seed. Squirrels don't like it but the seed-eating birds like it almost as much as sunflower seed.

Some desirable birds such as Inca doves and American sparrows like to obtain their seed from a low platform or the ground. They can be accommodated by spreading a small amount of mixed seed on a platform feeder every morning. Apply no more than will be consumed by noon each day to discourage rodents and white-winged doves. Another tactic that works well is to place the seed in a tubular feeder that is enclosed in a cage with openings only large enough for house finches and English sparrows to enter. They will disperse the seed to the ground to the waiting Inca doves and American sparrows as they seek their favorite part of the mix.

It is reported that the American goldfinches from up-north are in town and joining our resident lesser-goldfinches at tube feeders disbursing Niger thistle seed. The goldfinches are acrobatic and entertaining

as they pry out the tiny seed from the feeder. The American goldfinches are in their drab winter feathers now, but the lesser goldfinches are colorful year-around.