

What to Feed our Winter Birds

By Phil Riebel

Many of our feathered friends spend the winter in Miramichi, usually because they can find enough food to survive the winter. However, bird feeders can help them build up their fat storage and give them extra energy, especially during very cold winter days. Basically, feeding birds increases their chances of survival.

The best all-around bird food is black-oil sunflower seed. It has a high meat-to-shell ratio; it is high in fat, and its small size and thin shell make it easy for small birds to handle and crack. Suet is also popular for many species, especially woodpeckers and nuthatches. There are a few different types of suet available but in our backyard the birds seem to really like the Bird Pie (by Eco-Crust Company, Black Rock, NS). For a special treat, many species love peanuts, especially Blue Jays, Nuthatches, Chickadees and Woodpeckers. Nyger seed is an excellent choice for many of the finch species such as Goldfinch, Redpolls and Pine Siskins.

Some species like Robins and Waxwings don't typically come to bird feeders for seed, but they love berries. A great way to attract them is to have cherries, crabapples, serviceberries, strawberries or cranberries nearby. Berries and crabapples will also attract Jays and Woodpeckers.

The table below lists the food preference of some common birds that spend the winter in the Miramichi area. Some of the local species not listed on the table include White-winged Crossbills and Red Crossbills that show up occasionally at local feeders to eat black-oil sunflower and Nyger seed. They also like to eat the seeds of conifer trees like pine, spruce, hemlock and fir. If you do feed birds, make sure you store your seed in a cool, dry place. A large metal can is good because it will keep mice and other rodents out of the seed.

In general, bread and other sources of carbohydrates (rice, pasta, cooked potatoes) are not recommended as bird food because they lack key nutrients that birds need for survival. Some bread also has chemical preservatives that may not be safe for birds. Bread doesn't harm many species but it is like "junk food". Ducks in particular should not be fed bread because they cannot digest it properly. A better choice for ducks would be grapes cut in half, cracked corn, barley, oats, or birdseed.

Water is critical for birds, both for drinking and cleaning parasites from their feathers so they can fly properly. During our cold winter it is sometimes hard for birds to find open water so you will be doing them a great favor if you have a source of water for them. A small heated bird bath that sits on an old stump is all you need. The bird bath should be scrubbed, cleaned and filled with fresh water weekly.

For more information on this topic I recommend the books written by Sally Roth such as "Attracting Birds to your Backyard" published in 1998, as well as her most recent books. Another good source of information is the Cornell University website at www.birds.cornell.edu

Type of bird food	Chickadees	Nuthatches	Finches	Cardinals and grosbeaks	Sparrows and blackbirds	Jays	Woodpeckers	Pigeons and doves
Sunflower	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Corn					X	X		X
Millet			X		X			X
Nyger (thistle)			X					
Suet	X	X				X	X	
Peanuts	X					X		
Pieces of walnut	X						X	
Peanut butter	X						X	

Photos (these will be sent via Dropbox or Yousendit). The photos below are not for publishing.

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Common Redpoll are sometimes seen feeding on Alder seeds in the winter



Red-breasted Nuthatch are attracted to black-oil sunflower seeds and suet



A female Red Crossbill taking a pause after eating some Nyger seed