

Winter Care for Birds

Oklahoma's central North American geographical position offers unique topographical and climate diversity to its 355 regularly-occurring bird species. Of these, not all are migratory; many nest here and are permanent residents.

So as we enjoy these colder January temps indoors, read on for tips and resources to provide basic needs - food, water and shelter - to our avian inhabitants.

Familiarize yourself with the birds that live in your area.

Songbirds, [Oklahoma State University Reference L-274](#), offers a comprehensive listing of songbirds occurring in Oklahoma, along with their habitat, nesting and food requirements. Cornell University Lab of Ornithology has extensive birding resources on their website [here](#) that provide visual and song identification, and opportunities to submit and organize sightings to aid in conservation efforts.



Water - Is it necessary in winter?

Absolutely! Dehydration can also occur in winter, and bathing is still a necessity. If a natural water source is unavailable, provide a pan of water or birdbath near the food source, two inches in depth. Place a rock in the middle to aid access, and clean and refill often. Pan or birdbath warmers are also available to prevent icing. Safety is a factor for both water and food - choose visible and safe locations with an open clearance of about 10 feet from the nearest tree or shrub to allow for escape from predators or danger.

How and where do I provide food? Select feeders with a larger capacity or consider using multiple feeders, and move them every season if possible. Keep them consistently full (birds don't go on winter vacations like we do!). Remember to clean them often - remove debris, rinse with hot water and dry - before refilling, as wet and moldy seed can harbor disease. Seed a cleared area for the ground feeders.

Supplemental Food Options

Birds spend a great deal of energy feeding themselves and their young, especially in winter when insects and other sources are exhausted. Fatty suet and black oil sunflower seeds are popular choices, and other mixes are widely available in bulk and can be stored either in the freezer or a cool dry place. Check dates and shelf life before purchase, and keep in mind shelled varieties may not keep as long. Rotate out the older seed first.



Natural Food Options

Native trees, shrubs and grasses can provide seeds and berries for a variety of birds.

Consult [OSU fact sheet HLA-6435](#) reference for ideas on selecting low-maintenance plantings serving “double duty” for food and shelter.



Shelter and Habitat Structure

A favorable habitat structure determines how birds will use an area. Although every species has its own habitat requirement (e.g. tall trees, cliffs, dense forests, open areas, wetlands, prairies), they all require safety for nesting and protection from inclement weather and predation. Evergreens like rhododendrons, pines and magnolias become critical when deciduous trees can no longer provide winter cover. In your backyard, dense piles of prunings and varying heights of plant materials, rock or natural wood structures, and appropriate nest boxes can provide safe havens.

rock or natural wood structures, and appropriate nest boxes can provide safe havens.

Winter can be a great time to read and contemplate creating a four-season habitat to welcome birds to your backyard. Consider now plantings for next year’s food supply, a year-round water source, and vegetative and natural habitat structures.

Providing basic needs for our backyard birds is a rewarding effort – one that will continue to bring a joyful and satisfying return year after year.

© 2021, Terri Denney. All rights reserved.

[HLA-6435: Landscaping and Gardening for Birds](#)

[L-274: Songbirds](#)

[Iowa State Extension: How to Care for Birds in the Winter](#)