Feeding the Birds

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Have you put up a sugar water feeder for the migrating hummingbirds this fall? We have gotten the first reports of ruby-throats moving through San Antonio and taking advantage of sugar water feeders in addition to flowers in the landscape.

With the dry hot weather bird baths will attract both year round and migrant birds. If the bird bath has a trickle/drip mechanism to provide moving water, it becomes an especially likely place to see 9 or 10 different bird species in a day, including painted buntings, indigo buntings, orioles, and warblers.

October is also a good time to begin feeding the seed eating and insect-eating birds. The first of the migrating songbirds will be visiting and some of them will become winter residents. Hang seed and suet feeders from arbors and tree branches in relatively open areas where they are easy to refill and you can observe the visitors as they feed. Mounting feeders on posts also works well.

Bird feeding usually is most efficient when you feed single types of seed from each feeder. That practice reduces the amount of seed pushed out of the way by dominant birds as they seek their favorite seed. I do provide a mixed seed for the ground feeders on a platform feeder where they can select what they want to eat without having to remove the other seeds.

The mainstay of a winter bird feeding program is usually sunflower seed. Visit your favorite bird-supply retailer (which may be your plant nursery) and purchase a steel feeder with adjustable, weight sensitive perches. Sunflower seed is popular with cardinals, titmice, chickadees, and goldfinches but it is also relished by squirrels and white-winged doves. The use of the steel feeder with weight-sensitive perches allows you to prevent the squirrels from chewing through the feeder walls and also limits use by heavier birds like the white-wings. Generosity to wildlife is desirable but between the squirrels and white-winged doves you need a large budget for seed if unlimited access is allowed.

Enough seed falls on the ground from the sunflower seed feeder to attract desirable ground feeders like Inca doves and American sparrows, or you can provide a mixed seed offering on a platform feeder or even a piece of flagstone. Provide only the amount of feed on the platform feeder that is consumed by the birds by early afternoon to limit rodent involvement.

Another way to discourage the squirrels from dominating your bird-feeding effort is to provide safflower seed. Cardinals, chickadees, titmice and especially house finches like the white seed but squirrels pass it up. Use a tube feeder on the patio with safflower seed. Thistle is also fed with a tube feeder. It is a favorite of our resident lesser goldfinches and the wintering American goldfinches. They are very entertaining as they hang upside down and extract the tiny, nutritious seed.

For the insect-eaters consider offering suet. Suet is beef fat but you may not recognize it because it is offered in attractive blocks flavored with citrus, seeds, raisons and other flavors. Birds such as blue jays, starlings, thrashers, kinglets, mockingbirds and even warblers join cardinals, chickadees, and titmice feasting on the blocks offered in special suet cages.