

ATTRACTING SONGBIRDS IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

Questions and Answers from Acorn Naturalists

- 1. What type of feeder works best?** The answer to this depends on what types of birds you are trying to attract. If you are after specific species, such as goldfinches, you need special seed and special feeders (see Acorn Naturalists' handout on goldfinches). Hummingbirds need liquid food and bluebirds and mockingbirds will feed on insects such as mealworms. For most seed-eating songbirds, a general mix can be used, although there are tremendous variations in mixes, and many of the seed mixes sold locally are really more appropriate for eastern species (note the image of cardinals on many feeder bags. Cardinals only occur east of the Mississippi River). The hummingbird, goldfinch, platform and house feeders we offer at the Center have all been thoroughly tested in southern California and have proven themselves effective.
- 2. Will other species of birds be attracted to the feeder?** In southern California, we have successfully attracted several species of goldfinches, hummingbirds, house finches, white-crowned sparrows, brown towhees, scrub jays, evening grosbeaks, mockingbirds, mourning doves and many other species. We have even fed great blue herons and white egrets, although this was not intentional (they fished out the koi in our backyard pond one summer). Along these lines, you may occasionally feed a Cooper's hawk - we have seen them take goldfinches and sparrows at our feeders. For specific details on which birds are attracted to each mix, please see the attached guide.
- 3. My neighbor's cat catches birds, lizards, and anything else that moves in my garden. What can I do?** One can first try and educate the neighbor on the tremendous damage inflicted on wildlife by pet cats that are allowed to "follow their predatory instincts." It has been estimated that cats are the number one cause of death for wildlife living in urban areas (note: author has nothing against cats - *house* cats, that is). If that fails, strategic placement of feeders helps. Although birds like some shelter nearby to dodge hawks, the feeders should not be so nestled and sheltered that stray cats can easily ambush the birds. Also keep the feeders at least four feet off the ground, although some birds like doves and towhees will still "ground feed" on fallen seed.
- 4. I love the jays, but how do I keep them from chasing away other birds?** One of the most raucous visitors to your yard will be the scrub jays, often and incorrectly called blue jays. Jays can not resist peanuts, so we have a separate peanut feeder around which the scrub jays "argue" all day long about who "owns the peanut feeder," mostly leaving the songbird feeders alone. And yes, we have also seen the jays eat the peanuts, although most of the time they take them off and bury them. Whether they remember where they placed them remains unclear. Be sure to never feed them salted peanuts. The raw, unsalted peanuts that we offer are the perfect treat and children and adults will enjoy feeding them.
- 5. I just started feeding the birds, but no birds are coming to my feeder. What should I do?** First of all, it often takes time, usually a week or so, for birds to find the feeder and become accustomed to feeding at it. If no birds come within two weeks, try moving the feeder to another location. We have also found that multiple feeders with different mixes often bring in a wider variety and number of birds. Try several feeders with several of the mixes and see which ones work best.
- 6. How clean should I keep my feeders to avoid spreading any avian diseases?** There have been many studies on this topic, with no firm conclusions, but several guidelines have emerged. First, if your seed becomes rain-soaked, it is best to scoop out the seed and wash down and dry the feeder before replacing seed. If you feed hummingbirds, be sure to change the mixture every few days, particularly if the hummingbirds have not yet started to feed and the nectar remains unconsumed. Also, if you provide water, be sure to wash out the bird baths at least weekly, scrubbing them down with a brush monthly.
- 7. How important is it to keep my feeders filled with food?** If you stop feeding for a week or two, the birds will return soon after you refill the feeder. If you stop for a longer period of time (more than a month) you may have to start all over, with possibly a week or more lag time before the birds rediscover your feeder. If you want the maximum number and variety of birds in your yard, it is important to keep the feeders filled and occasionally cleaned.



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