



ERCCIS



Cornwall

## Helping Birds in Your Garden

Our network of gardens has become an invaluable refuge for a diversity of wildlife, perhaps most noticeably for birds. Many of the birds we consider as common garden visitors are in fact suffering huge population declines, often as a result of changes in the wider countryside which reduce the availability or quality of habitats for feeding, breeding and shelter. Luckily there are lots of ways you can help birds throughout the year. Encouraging them into your garden means that you can enjoy the sights and sounds of our 'feathered friends' right on your doorstep, whilst they also help to keep your garden naturally free from pests.

### Provide natural food

You can provide birds with sources of natural food like berries, fruit, nuts, seeds and insects by growing suitable plants. Depending on the size of your garden you could consider planting a mix of trees, hedges, bushes, shrubs and flowering plants. Native species offer a rich source of food for birds but some non-native garden plants can also be valuable. Try to choose species which will provide food sources at different times of the year, and take into account various feeding habits. For example, open areas of mown grass are useful for some species such as blackbirds and thrushes looking for worms, whilst a wild meadow area will attract insects and provide food for seed-eaters such as finches and sparrows.

You should also delay cutting back hedgerows and berry-bearing shrubs until late winter or after the berries have been eaten. Even clearing a patch of snow can help birds find insects.

#### Trees supporting lots of insects....

Oak, birch, hazel, willow, rowan and alder.

#### Plants with fruit, berries or hops....

Hawthorn, blackthorn, dog rose, guelder rose, holly, juniper, rowan, cotoneaster, bird cherry, ivy, spindle, crab apple, wild cherry, honeysuckle, pyracantha, bramble, apple, plum, cherry and pear trees, raspberry, blackcurrant and other fruit bushes. (Note that some berries eaten by birds are poisonous to humans!)

#### Plants with seeds....

Teasel, honesty, thistles, sunflower, scabious, forget-me-not, cosmos, goosefoot, knotgrass, michaelmas daisies, dandelion, plantain, spindle, knapweed, meadowsweet, cow parsley, stinging nettle and grasses such as common bent and red fescue.



A few of the birds you may attract to your garden (clockwise from top left): house sparrow; wren; nuthatch (photos: Adrian Davey); song thrush (photo: Terry Dunstan).

Following the principles of wildlife gardening will also help to encourage invertebrate prey: try not to be too tidy; add a log pile or compost heap; leave autumn leaf litter; avoid the use of pesticides and slug pellets that kill natural prey and can also poison birds; leave some windfall fruit and dead heads on plants so that birds can pick out the seeds.

### Supplementary feeding

Providing extra food to supplement their natural diet can be important for the survival of many birds, particularly during the winter months when the availability of natural food sources declines. You may attract a wide range of species to your garden, giving you the perfect opportunity to observe them close-up. However, **it is important to make sure you are supplying food responsibly and safely.** A great deal of research is being carried out into the effects of supplementary feeding and the Garden Bird Health Initiative has produced 'Best practice guidelines: how best to feed garden birds to maximise their welfare and conservation whilst minimising disease and other risks'. For more information contact: Universities Federation for Animal Welfare, The Old School, Brewhouse Hill, Wheathampstead, Herts AL4 8AN, tel: (01582) 831818, web: [www.ufaw.org.uk](http://www.ufaw.org.uk).

## What?

To maximise the number and diversity of birds visiting your garden, try putting out a variety of appropriate foods in a range of locations. It is important to buy safe, high-quality foods from reputable suppliers as some disease and poisons can be found in bird foods, for example aflatoxin in peanuts. Birdseed mixtures may include several different seed types including flaked maize, broken peanuts,



Goldfinches feeding on niger seed.  
Photo: Terry Dunstan

sunflower seeds (particularly black seeds), millet, and pinhead oatmeal. Other suitable foods include: dried or live mealworms; fat balls and bird cake; soaked white and brown bread; pieces of apple, pear and other fruits; suet; kitchen leftovers such as cooked rice, pastry, potatoes (baked, roasted and mashed), unsalted bacon rind and grated cheese.

## But remember:

Never feed salted food of any kind including salted peanuts and bacon; margarine or vegetable oils; milk; dehydrated foods like dessicated coconut, as the dried foods will swell. Whole peanuts and other large food items should only be used in purpose built feeders during the breeding season to prevent birds taking entire nuts which can choke young birds. It is best to avoid mouldy food entirely as some can cause respiratory infections. Don't put out too much food in one go - overfeeding can encourage unwelcome flocks of some species or if left uneaten may turn stale and mouldy or attract rats. It is better to put out smaller amounts and replenish regularly.

## Where?

Foods may be suitable for use in specialist feeders, on bird tables or simply scattered on the ground, with different species preferring different ways of foraging. It's important to site feeders and bird tables out of reach from cats but also have plant cover near feeding areas to help small birds escape and hide from natural predators such as sparrowhawks.

## Bird cake recipe

Mix about one-third melted fat (suet or lard) with two-thirds bird seed and kitchen scraps such as bread, dried fruit, cake and biscuit crumbs, grated cheese and minced peanuts. Pour the mixture into a mould (e.g. yoghurt pot or empty half coconut shell) and leave to set. Suspend them from branches with string or wire threaded through a small hole in the base, or turn out onto your bird table.

## Hygiene

Bird feeders, tables and bird baths should be regularly cleaned (weekly or fortnightly) using an appropriate disinfectant to prevent the build up and spread of diseases. They should be dried thoroughly before reuse. Ideally, bird tables should be swept clean each day to remove droppings and any uneaten food. Move feeders around the garden periodically to avoid droppings building up in one place.

If you are a cat owner, consider attaching a bell to your cat's collar to help warn the local wildlife of its approach!

## Water

Birds need access to water all year round for both drinking and bathing. You could provide a bird bath, create a shallow-edged pond or simply place a small container such as a flowerpot base on a bird table. Keep them topped up with clean, fresh water, and free of ice in winter (but do not use salt or antifreeze!)



Blackbird at bird bath.  
Photo: Terry Dunstan

## Nest sites and shelter

Birds need cover to escape predators, to afford protection against wind and rain, to roost and to build their nests in. Planting and maintaining dense, wide hedgerows, together with a variety of trees and shrubs within your garden will provide opportunities for nesting and shelter, as well as a source of food. If you don't have much space in your garden then growing climbing plants like ivy, clematis and honeysuckle will also offer valuable cover. Thorny plants will give protection from predators while ornamental conifers and evergreen shrubs will provide some shelter during the cold, wet winter months.

## Nest boxes

If no natural nesting sites are available or if you wish to increase the number of sites, you can provide nest boxes. Many different types are available to buy or you can make your own. See the separate information sheet for advice on how to construct and site nest boxes for small garden birds such as house sparrow, blue tit, robin and wren. It is important that nest boxes are inaccessible to predators, away from feeding areas and not too exposed to prevailing winds, rain and sun. They need to be maintained and cleaned out annually after the breeding season.



Hole-fronted nest box for tits and house sparrows.  
Photo: Tamara Weeks

### For further information and advice:

Wildlife Information Service  
Environmental Records Centre for Cornwall  
and the Isles of Scilly (ERCCIS)  
Five Acres, Allet, Truro, Cornwall TR4 9DJ

Tel: (01872) 240777 ext 250  
Email: wis@cornwallwildlifetrust.org.uk  
Web: www.ercis.co.uk

### Other useful contacts:

- British Trust for Ornithology (BTO)  
www.bto.org, tel: (01842) 750050
- Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB),  
www.rspb.org.uk, tel: (01767) 680551
- Vine House Farm Bird Foods  
www.vinehousefarm.co.uk,  
tel: (01775) 630208

### Get involved:

Submit your bird and other wildlife records  
at [www.ercis.co.uk/wildlife\\_recording](http://www.ercis.co.uk/wildlife_recording)

Become a member of Cornwall Wildlife  
Trust at [www.cornwallwildlifetrust.org.uk](http://www.cornwallwildlifetrust.org.uk)