

Shelter for Birds

The surest sign of a healthy, vibrant garden is a large and varied bird population, and the best ways of having that is to supply food and shelter.

According to a recent RSPB UK survey, half of all householders feed birds throughout the year, and two thirds of people provide food during the winter. This is specially important as intensive farming has forced so many bird species to increasingly rely on all our gardens. Depending on how bird-friendly the garden is, you might have between 20 and 40 different species dropping in throughout the year. Jennifer Owens, a Leicestershire naturalist, has counted 49 species in her 'typical' garden, while committed ornithologists will tally up even higher numbers.

You can easily lay your hands on peanut feeders, the gardeners' favourite, and niger seed dispensers at garden centres. But if you buy a sunflower seed dispenser, you'll need to ration this very expensive and popular seed.

The other option is to feed for free: recycle stale bread and elderly cheese rinds on a bird table; dispose of fatty offcuts in a home-made fatcake; or see the boney remains of a joint quickly disappear. We once brought in the New Year with a spit-roast rib of lamb as gently falling snowflakes cooled the mulled wine. Next day, every bird from miles around started tucking into the fatty remains, leaving not a single scrap. I wonder how many birds owe their lives to that roast.

However valuable this food may be, many birds will appreciate nesting facilities as well. Enjoy the fun of seeing would-be parents busily foraging for suitable twigs, moss or feathers, preparing a site for the precious brood. And then, a few weeks later, the same parents, swollen with pride, will emerge with their newly fledged offspring.

Why not buy a box for tits: for blue tits, the round entrance hole has a 25mm diameter; and a larger 28mm one is suitable for great tits or sparrows. You might even be interested in buying a box kitted out with a camera to let you view the fledglings inside the nest. Or, you could track down a garden centre with TV birds and I even know of a few schools with a screen in the classroom so the children can watch the nestlings.

When siting your own box, make sure it's in a sheltered spot out of the reach of predators, like squirrels, and that parents can come and go without falling victim to your cat's skilled claw. And there is, of course, a selfish reason for inviting tits to stay in your garden: they'll make short work of any troublesome greenfly or sawfly larvae, by either feeding their offspring or themselves.

You'll find your boxes will provide much needed shelter for different birds at other times of year as well. During a cold snap, a couple of wrens took over a swallow's nest. The swallows had used clay and saliva to construct a mud house against a beam in one of my sheds. I had to get into the habit of leaving the shed door open to allow free access to the nest, regardless of the weather, so even after the swallows had left in the autumn, the door was often left open. This allowed the wrens to come in and find the abandoned nest. They then proceeded to line it with moss and took up residence.

Bird boxes can be expensive, so you might prefer some DIY boxes. The British Trust for Ornithology's website outlines designs suitable for different species.