

## Why feed birds in winter

It's estimated that nearly half of UK gardeners spend £600 million every year on feeding wild birds. We love seeing birds in the garden, and we lay on bird boxes and wild tangle areas for nesting and roosting. As a bonus, birds pay their way by devouring pests as well as peanuts and pricey sunflower seed.

But how can we be sure they're pest masters? What should we feed them? And how do we make our feeding stations safe and disease-free?

Over the years, researchers have set up experiments to monitor how different bird species work as biological controls for farmers and growers. In 2012, C.M.M.Moles and M.E.Viser<sup>1</sup> from the Netherlands Institute of Ecology showed how great tits controlled caterpillars in orchards. They found that great tits reduced caterpillar numbers, especially when feeding on the larvae for a long period, ideally throughout the breeding season. The scientists also discovered that farmers got nearly twice the weight of apples – rising from 4.7kg to 7.8kg per tree.

Although this kind of research doesn't apply directly to gardens, there's no doubt our garden visitors must be worthwhile. But in 2012, Melanie Orres and Mark Fellowes of the University of Reading<sup>2</sup> focussed their research on gardens. They wanted to see how wild birds controlled pea aphids on broad beans when they placed feeders one metre away from the beans.

The scientists wrote: 'To our knowledge, this is the first experimental evidence of prey depletion around bird feeders in private domestic gardens.' The blue tits and great tits had significantly reduced numbers of nearby aphids and eventually wiped out many aphid colonies. Most of us think this happens, but it's reassuring when scientists confirm it.

These research trials show it's important to have a large bird population early in the season. So, we need to feed birds over winter to let them survive and breed in the spring. In fact, all-year round feeding keeps birds in our gardens. There's usually plenty wild foraging in the autumn if you live in a rural spot, but urban birds will still need some supplementary, if reduced, rations.

The downside is that weaker birds may survive the winter, but poorer specimens will be weeded out in time.

The birds' menu depends on the species. Fat cakes and other fatty foods are usually popular with lots of birds and are a cheap option when you make your own. But some recent research<sup>3</sup> has suggested that while fat cakes benefit great spotted woodpeckers, tits don't thrive on them. But, as with other research, the data was collected during woodland trials and may not fully apply to what we feed in gardens.

Black sunflower seed or hearts are a good, if much more expensive staple food. Peanuts are popular with tits and nyjer seed appeals to fine-billed finches. Sultanas, first soaked in water, are ideal for ground-feeding blackbirds. Otherwise, pinhead oats suit dunnocks; and robins and blackbirds would kill for mealworms. Whatever feed you use, it's always best to buy quality products from reputable suppliers.

Although our feed is much appreciated, the feeders need to be kept clean. Dirty feeders with old food laced with droppings can cause disease that quickly spreads through all the avian residents.

We should always put feeders in safe, sheltered places. But, to avoid being plastered with droppings, they should not be sited beneath a popular perching branch. Inevitably, birds spill feed on the ground where it quickly becomes a source of disease and an unwelcome lure for rats.

Reduce spillage and wasted food by making sure you don't put out more than the birds quickly get through. Clear away droppings and uneaten food before it turns fusty. Clean and disinfect feeders regularly; the British Trust for Ornithology recommends we should do this every week.

Feeders can be harbingers of disease. Sadly, I've yet to come across one that is as easy to dismantle as is claimed on the packet. But we should do our best to keep them clean.

<sup>1</sup> CHRISTEL M. M. MOLS and MARCEL E. VISSER Netherlands Institute of Ecology (NIOO-KNAW), PO Box 40, 6666 ZG Heteren, the Netherlands 2002.

<sup>2</sup> Melanie E. Orros, Mark D.E. Fellowes, School of Biological Sciences, Philip Lyle Building, University of Reading, Reading RG6 6AS, UK, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> British Trust for Ornithology website.

### **Make your own fatcake**

Use beef dripping as the base for the fatcake as it sets hard and sticks to the stick in the centre of the fatcake. Melt the fat in a small saucepan over a low heat, adding in any fat trimmings from meat or the fat that has set on top of a sauce or stew.

Put some medium oatmeal, crumbs from the toaster or small pieces of stale brown bread in to a large yoghurt or cream pot. Pour in the fat to just below the top of the pot. Use a knobbly stick to stir it together and leave the stick in the middle of the brew.

When the fat has set hard, tie a string round the bit of stick protruding from the top of the fatcake; cut the pot away and hang the fatcake from a suitable branch.