

Wildlife Gardening: Birds in your garden

Birds are amongst the most successful creatures on the planet. They have colonised everywhere from the bleakest Arctic to the sweltering Equator and are often so common that we don't notice them. They are, without doubt, creatures that a gardener should befriend as they can help keep down the amount of insect pests in your garden far more effectively than any spray. Blackbirds are a familiar bird in urban gardens. They are often seen hunting for insects on your lawn. Blue tits will collect thousands of aphids each season to feed their nestlings. Robins are a familiar sight, following you around when you are digging your garden. Thrushes, which used to be more common, feed on the slugs and snails that can make a gardener's life so difficult, and sparrows that feed on insects, seeds and scraps from a bird table. All of these birds help to keep your garden healthy.



So how can you encourage birds into your garden?

Provide natural food and cover

Even in the smallest urban garden, planting seed or fruit-bearing plants will attract birds. The varieties you pick depend on the size of your garden, so the list that follows provides just a small handful of ideas. If you have room, do consider small trees or shrubs – these provide cover for birds roosting overnight and you may be lucky enough to have them nesting.

| | | | |
|------------------|------------------------------|--------|------------------------------|
| Barberry | (<i>Berberis vulgaris</i>) | Hazel | (<i>Corylus avellana</i>) |
| Bramble | (<i>Rubus fruticosus</i>) | Holly | (<i>Ilex aquifolium</i>) |
| Cornflower | (<i>Centurea cyanus</i>) | Ivy | (<i>Hedera helix</i>) |
| Dogwood | (<i>Cornus sanguinea</i>) | Privet | (<i>Ligustrum vulgare</i>) |
| Evening primrose | (<i>Oenothera biennis</i>) | Teasel | (<i>Dipsacus fullonum</i>) |
| Forget-me-not | (<i>Myosotis arvensis</i>) | | |

Put up a nest box

It is possible to encourage many different species of birds into your garden and there are many different designs of boxes available to buy. However, if you are feeling quite creative it can be simple enough to make your own nest box from a single piece of wood, a few nails and some roof felt. You can find out how in our Wildlife Gardening Information Pack available to buy from our online shop. Remember that you need to remove the old nest material during the winter, so the roof or one of the sides needs to be hinged or removable to give you access to the nest box.



Put up some bird feeders

One of the easiest steps you can take is to set up a bird table. This could be as simple as a platform hanging from a tree or supported on a post. A lip around the table will prevent food from blowing away but remember to leave gaps in the corners of the lip to allow drainage. The main thing is to site your table where cats cannot get to it, either by climbing up or leaping from a nearby branch. Squirrels may also take advantage of an easy meal and be seen raiding your bird table. You can buy squirrel proof bird tables from garden centres should you require it or you can watch and enjoy them in your garden. Whatever feeder you use, remember to clean it regularly (at least weekly) to avoid the risk of spreading disease.



Which bird food should I use?

Once you begin putting out a supply of food, birds from quite a wide area will get used to your routine and turn up expecting it so it is better to feed at regular times each day, especially in winter. Birds love kitchen scraps such as grated cheese, bits of apple, oats, black sunflower seeds – even mealworms. High energy foods such as fat balls can be particularly useful in the winter months. If you are going to provide food, don't forget water. Any shallow dish will do, although a group of starlings splashing about can empty a water container in no time!

A few words of caution about peanuts. Firstly, peanuts should be certified free of aflatoxin, they should not be offered loose, particularly in the breeding season as parent birds have been reported feeding them to nestlings and choking them. Also it is important to remove old peanuts from feeders as they develop a toxic chemical as they get older and can kill the birds you are trying to help. During the winter, higher energy foods can be extremely beneficial to local birds. Suet balls are an excellent source of energy and although you can buy them, you may like to make your own, there are plenty of recipes available on the internet.

Providing food, water and shelter for birds in your garden can have a significant impact on bird populations. The loss of natural habitat in the wider countryside due to factors such as development, has led to the fragmentation of suitable areas for wildlife to live, feed and breed in. Urban areas have therefore become a much needed resource for wildlife you're your garden can play an important role.

If you would like to **find out more** about how to encourage wildlife into your garden, please see the Wildlife Gardening pages of our website at <http://www.hiwwt.org.uk/wildlife-gardening>.

If you have a question about wildlife you may find in your garden please contact **WildLine**, the Trust's free **wildlife information service** on 01489 774406 or Email: wildline@hiwwt.org.uk