



GOOD PRACTICE WHEN FEEDING WILD BIRDS

Bird feeding in the backyard brings enjoyment—and responsibilities

BY MICHELLE PLANT

WHILE THE JURY is still out on the question ‘To Feed or Not to Feed?’, as Darryl Jones writes (pp. 16–19), a great many people are already feeding wild birds.

For those who feed birds around their homes there are some simple practices that can limit the potential for negative impacts on bird health and wellbeing.

A range of practices is recommended here for the conscientious backyard bird food provider. As it is extremely difficult to implement health care for wild birds, all care must be taken in the selection and management of any food provided. Add a range of natural foods to the menu via some gardening for birds, and we are well on our way to supporting native birds in our own backyards!

Good fresh food

Provide fresh, clean, quality feed that is nutritionally balanced for the species being attracted.

A variety of bird feed is available through supermarkets and pet and produce stores. Wherever possible select a feed type that is similar to that which the bird would eat in the wild. If in doubt about what your particular backyard birds’ diet, a guidebook such as the *Readers Digest Complete Book of Australian Birds* or the relevant *Handbook of Australian, New Zealand and Antarctic Birds* volume will assist.

Some seed mixes contain large quantities of sunflower seeds, which may attract larger seed-eating (granivorous) birds (particularly parrots), but these seeds are high in fat. Black sunflower seeds should be avoided altogether; a small quantity of grey-striped sunflower seeds is fine. (The detrimental effects of high fat diets on bird health are similar to those for us unfeathered creatures). Avoid feeds containing high quantities of corn or sorghum as these are



difficult for medium and small birds to break. In addition, seed only diet mixes are known to be deficient in essential nutrients—look for quality mixes that have essential nutrients such as calcium added.

Frugivorous (fruit-eating) birds will enjoy a small selection of fresh fruit at the feeder. Specialised mixes are available for nectar-feeding and insectivorous birds. Some of these are prepared by mixing with water. Any prepared feed should be removed after a few hours. Indeed any uneaten feed, including seed mixes, should be left out only as long as humans would still feel comfortable eating it themselves.

If feeding carnivorous birds, suitable recipes are available from wildlife caring associations, meat alone (e.g. mince) is not suitable in the long-term as it is deficient in nutrients and can cause growth problems.

Extend offerings to naturally growing foods. In a time when exotic plants are dying off due to lack of water, replenish plant stocks with a variety of native trees, shrubs and grasses that generally require much less watering and will provide birds with buds, fruits, nectar and insects.

Human foodstuffs, including processed foods such as bread, cheese, sausages and chips, are not appropriate for bird feeding.

Take a few minutes to investigate the product’s nutritional analysis, use-by dates (if there isn’t one, question the quality of the feed) and the cleanliness. Is it dusty?—this can indicate that the feed is contaminated.

As well as leaving out food, cultivating an abundant garden can attract birds; here a Yellow Rosella. Photo by Peter Merritt

A trio of pigeons share seed at a simple but effective birdfeeder: from left, Common Bronzewing, Peaceful Dove and Bar-shouldered Dove. Photo by Chris Sanderson

Sanitary dry food storage

Maintain fresh supplies through appropriate storage.

Store feed appropriately in airtight, water and pest-proof containers—in a cool, dry area. Check it regularly and dispose of it if contamination has occurred. This is extremely important as some dry foods may already have some level of contamination (for example, by fungi or bacteria). Fungal toxins (aflatoxins) can occur before harvesting and prior to purchase. Without appropriate storage, contaminants can reach levels that can create serious health problems for birds visiting a feeder.

Protect stored food from insects or rodents by using some pest management, for example camphor tablets or traps. If using pest sprays, do not allow the residue to make contact with the feed supply.

Clean, appropriate feeding equipment

Choose practical feeders and position them wisely.

Use feeders appropriate for the species being fed, designed to that ensure there is no risk of food becoming contaminated by droppings and to limit feed falling and collecting on the ground. Do not place feeders under places where birds might perch and release their droppings into the food. (However, vegetation nearby will help smaller birds feel secure whilst feeding.)

Stainless steel feeding dishes are the best to use as they are non-porous and can be effectively cleaned and sterilised to ensure that the feeder does not harbor dangerous bacteria. A stainless steel bowl (such as a coup cup—used in aviaries and widely available at pet stores) can easily be secured inside most hanging feeders to ensure a hygienic feeding dish is used, which can be removed for cleaning.

If selecting a feeder that has a stored supply of seed, ensure the feed remains fresh and dry (this may be difficult in humid or wet conditions). On rainy days, wait for a dry spell or protect the feed from becoming wet.

How much food is enough?

Avoid over-feeding and competition.

When possible, limit feeding time to an interval of approximately 15 minutes. Place a small quantity of feed out for the birds (possibly ¼ cup) either once or twice a day—in the morning and/or in the afternoon. If several species visit, use several trays and feed over 15–20 minutes. This will help to limit competition.

Over-feeding can affect a bird's health and it is important for birds to continue to forage naturally, so

that they are more likely to gain a balanced diet and don't become dependant on the feeder. It may help to stagger the days on which feed is offered so that individuals don't become too reliant on the artificial food source. Further studies are required on the issue of dependency—to determine what, if any, the affects might be, however, it is always wise to follow a line of caution.

Offering small quantities, on intermittent days, may also prevent predatory birds and cats becoming accustomed to any particular feeding time. In addition, it may reassure the person providing the feed that they are not essential to the birds' survival and that they can to go on holiday without worrying about the birds!

Fresh, clean water

If offering water, ensure that it is fresh.

The water container needs to be cleaned thoroughly and the supply replenished daily. It is important to monitor the condition of the water: if it becomes contaminated it will need cleaning and replenishing more frequently. Once again, consider the effect of high temperatures on a contaminated water supply.

Keep water dishes/baths off the ground and ensure they are not placed directly under trees or where birds are likely to perch and contaminate the water with their droppings. It is also important to keep the water in a cool area of the garden.

Hygiene

It is essential to maintain a high standard of cleanliness.

Illnesses such as salmonellosis, campylobacteriosis and psittacosis can spread between birds or from birds to humans. By keeping equipment and the feeding area clean, and always washing one's hands, the chances of becoming ill will be minimised.

Scrub all feeding and watering equipment (using a small amount of household detergent) daily, then once a week disinfect by soaking for 10 minutes in a solution of 1:9 household bleach to water (made fresh), followed by a thorough rinse and dry. (Refer to manufacturers instructions for safe chemical use. Soaking in vinegar may be a reasonable non-chemical alternative.)

If using a mixer or blender to prepare a meal for carnivorous/insectivorous birds ensure equipment is completely dismantled and each part cleaned thoroughly after each use. Keep feeding equipment well away from household eating areas, including the kitchen sink and foodstuffs.

Myles Plant feeds a friendly Crimson Rosella at a Bunya Mountain getaway: such close encounters with birds can inspire a lifetime of interest. Photo by Michelle Plant

An Australian King-Parrot enjoys a handout. Photo by Dean Ingwersen



Waste (left over food and bird droppings) should be cleaned up from on and under a feeder. If allowed to build up these can encourage the spread of disease from bird to bird and are potentially harmful to people. Waste may attract less desirable species such as rodents to the yard and possibly the house.

If there are a number of safe positions in the yard, it is wise to move the feeder occasionally to allow areas to rest. At a hardware store, I recently found a garden spike that supports a bird feeder. This is an excellent idea, as it allows the feeder to be suspended and easily moved to a clean area frequently without too much effort. A movable stand or rotation between alternative hanging points would also be effective.

Risks for the feeder and the fed

Be aware of and manage the risks.

Ensure that by attracting birds to a feeder that they (or the person feeding them) are not being exposed to unnecessary risks. Offer feed in a clean area that is safe from traffic and predation.

There have been instances of people becoming ill after coming into contact with faeces and faecal dust (which can be stirred up when mowing the yard). If visiting the doctor, people should mention having been in close contact with wild birds, and note the particular species of bird they have been feeding. Pregnant women or anyone who is currently ill or immuno-compromised should avoid close contact with wild birds and their faeces.

Observe the effects of your feeding activity. By offering feed, birds can be drawn into areas where they might be at higher risk of being preyed upon by predatory birds (e.g. currawongs, crows, raptors, butcherbirds) and cats. Some more aggressive birds (e.g. magpies and miners) can take advantage of feeding sites, and exclude smaller birds, raid nests and generally become a nuisance.

It is also important to consider how the feeding activity might affect one's neighbours. For example, people should be careful not to place feeders close to where people hang out their washing—a quick way to 'soil' neighbourly relations! Another is to attract large numbers of noisy birds (such as lorikeets) too early in the morning.

Wherever possible either feed four-legged pets inside, or remove their leftovers when feeding them outside. Some aggressive birds will not only take advantage of an unattended bird feeder, they will also target and even monopolise fluffy's or fido's dinner bowl!

Dealing with sick or dead birds

Handle sick or dead birds with great caution.

Illness occurs naturally in wild birds. Reasonable judgment should be exercised before intervening and taking action when unwell birds are attracted to the feeder.

Very sick or dead birds should be handled with caution. Use protective gloves and a mask. Sick or injured birds can be taken to the local veterinarian for attention. A clean, closed cardboard box with a soft towel lining is suitable for transport. Ensure sufficient ventilation in the box and within the vehicle. Note that generally a veterinarian is only able to release wild birds to a registered carer, and for some it is a policy that if the bird cannot be returned to the wild it must be euthanased.

Birds that recuperate should be released on a full stomach in the vicinity where they were found, preferably in the early evening before dark. Be sure if you are not able to care for the bird that you provide information about where it was collected so it can be returned for release.

If potential health risks to birds' or peoples' health are identified by a veterinarian, feeding should be



stopped for a period of time. This will allow the birds to disperse, and thereby limit the risks of disease being transferred at or near the feeder.

Dead birds need to be disposed of with care. Contact the local council and ask for their recommendation—some councils have a collection service for deceased wildlife. Generally it is suggested that the body be placed in two layers of sealed plastic bags, but council may prefer this not to be placed directly into household rubbish collection bins.

Any large or frequent occurrences of dead birds should be reported to the local Veterinary Laboratory or wildlife management agency. (Note: All native wildlife is the property of the Crown and protected by law.)

Bird-friendly backyard gardening

Planting local native plants achieves long-term support of birds by providing a range of benefits including the opportunity to forage naturally.

Feeding only provides for a limited component of a bird's nutritional needs. By planting a variety of natives, backyards can be transformed to provide nectar, fruit, native seeds and nutritious insects, thereby supplying a natural and perfectly balanced diet. Native trees, shrubs and grasses will also offer protection and materials for nesting. How wonderful for adults and children alike to not only watch birds at a feeder, but possibly have the joy of watching them nesting in their very own backyard.

A visit to a local nursery that specialises in natives will soon reveal a list of bird attracting plants that are suited to that particular area. Other sources of information include the Birds in Backyards website (<http://www.birdsinbackyards.net/>) and local councils. Another benefit of planting natives is that they generally require less watering, many are even drought resistant. (Check for Government rebates that support replanting.)

When gardening, it is important to limit use of chemicals—bugs are an important part of many birds' diets. The Gardening Australia website has recommendations for non-chemical treatments. Natural remedies keep invertebrate pest numbers down and birds do the rest.

The more that is on offer in the backyard, the greater the variety of birds and bird activities one will be able to enjoy. A bird identification book and some binoculars are a wonderful addition to a backyard birder's equipment. Imagine entertaining friends or grandchildren with a wildlife spectacular for which you are the commentator. What a truly rich and wonderful experience for all!

Above left: Carnivorous species such as Kookaburras and this Grey Butcherbird are unwelcome in some gardens, but are just as rewarding to feed as other birds. Photo by Glenn Ehmke

Above: A Noisy Miner eating bread. This aggressive native species can become overabundant and exclude smaller birds from gardens and feeders. Photo by Glenn Ehmke

MICHELLE PLANT has been investigating wild bird feeding practices for several years and is undertaking a PhD on the subject at the University of Queensland while assisting O'Reilly's Rainforest Guesthouse to ensure best practices for their commercial wild bird feeding activity. People currently feeding wild birds in south-east Queensland who might be interested in taking part in the study are invited to contact Michelle at michelleplant@bigpond.com