

WHICH IS THE BEST BIRD SEED?

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I'm tempted to write the world's shortest column.

Q. What should I feed the birds?

A. Oil (black) sunflower seed. The end.

Oh, all right, I'll elaborate. One of the first programs I ever did as a naturalist, about thirty years ago, was on bird feeding. I still have the file I assembled at the time. A four-year Delaware study found that five kinds of seed, out of fifteen varieties available, comprised more than 80 per cent of all seed taken. In decreasing order of bird preference, they were sunflower, peanut hearts, cracked corn, white millet, and canary seed.

Seed aficionados may be wondering, "Which sunflower seed, striped or black?" The Delaware study didn't specify. However, I found a chart in my old file that compared 16 seed varieties. It showed that black was preferred over striped sunflower seed by most bird species.

This chart, issued by the National Wildlife Federation in the early 1980s, included 13 types of common feeder birds such as chickadees, goldfinches and purple finches. The latter three species preferred the black sunflower seed. If goldfinches are your favorite, the same data showed that you could make them even happier if you bought nyjer (thistle) seed or hulled sunflower seed. But, for the overall biggest bang for your bird seed buck, black sunflower seed was the choice.

Thirty years later, has anything changed? I did some digging and found another NWF pamphlet (from this millennium) that had the same 13 birds and 16 seed varieties. The report was the result of over 700,000 observations made in states ranging from Maine to California. Only one seed ranked a 10 with four species of birds. Want to guess which one? That's right, oil (black) sunflower seed.

This newer chart indicated that black sunflower seed was the favorite of cardinals, chickadees, evening grosbeaks, and purple finches. Striped sunflower seed was the

favorite of only one bird, the common grackle. Take the hulls off the sunflower seeds and they become the favorite of house finches and goldfinches.

Seed can be used in platform or tube feeders, both of which are commercially available, or in home-made feeders. If your feeder is on a pole and you don't want to be feeding squirrels, keep it away from low-hanging tree branches and mount some sort of guard to keep the squirrels from climbing up. I found that the torpedo-style baffle works very well.

Of course, not all winter birds are seed eaters. We don't want to forget the woodpeckers. There's nothing they like better than peanut butter or beef suet. You can buy suet with seed mixed in but I wouldn't bother, particularly if you are providing seed elsewhere in your yard. Besides woodpeckers, suet will also attract chickadees and nuthatches.

Suet can simply be suspended in one of those plastic, net-like onion or fruit bags, unless you have squirrel teeth to contend with. Then, I suggest a metallic suet feeder that can either be made or purchased (see photo).

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Spreyer/bird seed

If all the birds coming to your feeders suddenly disappear, look around. Somewhere in your yard there's probably either a Cooper's or sharp-shinned hawk. They're there to feed on the birds feeding at your feeders. The food chain; you gotta love it!

--Mark Spreyer is the Director of the Stillman Nature Center in Barrington, Illinois.

Shameless Plug

Stop by the Stillman Nature Center on any Sunday and enjoy the festival of winter birds that frequent our feeders. A special thanks to **Mike Schudrowitz** of **Wild Bird Center of Fox River Grove**, and **Becky Menich** of **Pileated Pride** for donating the suet feeding component complete with an effective squirrel/raccoon baffle. Becky also has donated many "Home-Style" suet cakes which she produces right here in Barrington. For more information, visit their websites and please support our local businesses.