Attracting birds to your garden can be a nurturing, delightful, and educational experience. To some people, bird feeding is life’s greatest joy. To others it is their only close contact to and connection with nature, perhaps leading them to support habitat conservation. For many kids, backyard birds form the basis of a lifetime devotion to wildlife and wilderness. Feeding birds, though, must be done with utmost consideration and responsibility.

**Think before starting.** 1) Are there cats I can’t control in the area? 2) Can I go the distance and be there for the birds I feed? 3) Will feeding attract European Starlings, House Sparrows, rats, or other creatures that negatively impact native species? 4) Is there adequate shelter where the birds I feed can flee from hawks? The wrong answers are 1) yes, 2) no, 3) yes, and 4) no: if you had any of those, forget luring birds to you with feeders, and go where they are instead.

**Timing.** At Point Reyes Station, California, I feed songbirds only in winter, beginning in late September when migratory finches and sparrows begin to arrive, and I wean them in late April. Some feel that it is not a good idea to feed during the local breeding season; it may distract nesting birds from domestic duties and increase breeding densities of potential nest predators, like jays and squirrels.

**Commitment.** If you feed birds, the birds in your charge become your responsibility. Protect birds at your feeder from cats (don’t feed birds if you have cats in your yard), and do all you can to minimize window kills (closing the curtains and shades when you are not at home may save many birds).

Occasionally, transmittable diseases become established and are passed around feeders, especially by small finches at hanging tube feeders. If you see groggy-looking goldfinches or siskins, immediately clean the feeder(s) with a 1 to 4 solution of bleach in water, rinse thoroughly, and dry them before hanging them out again. If the condition persists, take down your feeders until the sick birds move on.

Regular and thorough cleaning of all feeders and providing clean (unfrozen) water are other necessary chores. Moldy as well as sprouting seed should be discarded.

**Types of Feeders.** There are innumerable types of feeders, ranging from seeds scattered on a railing, stump, or log to commercial, many-tiered contraptions with automatic loaders. The best choice is a hanging feeder designed to deny access to jays, cowbirds, and other predators, avian and mammalian. These prevent indiscriminate feeding, minimizing the effect bird feeding may have on the balance between predators and their prey.

More important than the kind of feeder is its location. Feeders can be away from shelter, but be sure that spilled seeds do not get to the ground. Feeders near the ground should be just a quick flight to cover but not close enough to allow a coiled feline to spring successfully.

Feeding hummingbirds (or not) is a more complex topic than feeding songbirds. For basic thoughts on that, see “Hummingbirds—an American Dream” (www.prbo.org/Hummers.html). Important: If a feeder is empty, or unused because of old sugar water, remove it. Hummingbirds are on such frugal energy budgets that they cannot afford to revisit feeders unrewarded. Keep feeders clean and fresh and full—or take them down.

Many naturalists and biologists would agree that the best backyard bird-attracting regime is to provide fresh water and to landscape with native plants that are appropriate to your region and
used by local native birds (and other wildlife) for habitat. Local Audubon and Native Plant Society chapters may list recommended species; native plant gardeners and nurseries are also excellent resources; and you can visit www.prbo.org/backyard.htm for information and resources on landscaping for birds and to obtain a copy of the PRBO handout “Feeding Birds Safely.”

There are those who would simply say, “Never ever feed wild birds—it is bad for them and for the stability of their populations and balance with their adversaries.” However, since 20 to 50 million American homes do maintain feeders, it is important that “feeder responsibility” be taught and practiced.

Rich Stallcup is PRBO’s Naturalist in the Education Program.

The Grand List

The Grand List highlights current PRBO priority projects in need of funds. If you can help in any way to support these projects, please contact Sarah Huard (415-868-1221, ext. 324). We are, of course, always appreciative of general operational support that allows us to fund priorities as needed.

**Palomarin Field Station:** To expand our pioneering, multi-decadal breeding songbird research to include habitat succession and climate change studies. Cost: $3,000 per intern (5); $12,000 Project Manager (1 part-time)

**Farallon Islands—Intern Training:** To assist in data collection in our world-renowned research on seabirds and marine mammals in this largest breeding colony in the continental U.S. Cost: $3,000 each (5)

**Backup generator and other emergency preparedness:** To minimize disruption to our work when outages occur at our headquarters in western Marin County. Cost: $5,000

**Website Enhancement:** To modernize the PRBO website to reach new audiences and to provide real-time data exchange between staff, partners, and volunteers. Cost: $10,000

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