



Inside Region 3

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A Dinner Party That's for the Birds



Bird feeders come in a variety of shapes and sizes to accommodate your selection of dinner party guests. [Photo courtesy of Tim Green/Creative Commons.](#)

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Thinking of throwing a dinner party for your bird guests? What should you do? Luckily, you don't need to rent a ballroom. You can actually throw your party any place, even as small as your apartment deck or patio. No need for a huge amount of room.

If your goal is to attract the most diverse feathered guests, you need to know what they like to eat and drink and how they consume it.

If you've ever visited a bird store, you may have been overwhelmed by what is available. But remember, all seeds aren't what they're cracked up to be. The mixed seed that you find in clear plastic bags in grocery stores, though appealing, aren't your best choice. Even if the price is right, they contain large amounts of milo - a large, reddish round seed, also known as sorghum. Most birds are picky, so they don't eat the stuff and it ends up on the ground.

The best all-around food that attracts the most birds, is black oil sunflower seeds. Even sparrows and doves eat them. These seeds aren't too expensive and come in large quantities. If you don't mind the price, shelled sunflower seeds are a good alternative and eliminates the mess.

Striped sunflower seeds are a well-known snack for people, but their large size makes it difficult for smaller birds to crack. Northern cardinals, blue jays, and grosbeaks have no problem with these.

Straight safflower seeds can be offered as an alternative to sunflower seeds. Some dinner hosts offer these, because it seems most squirrels don't care for them. This may be true, but not all birds care for them either. They are better in mixes.

Peanuts, either shelled or unshelled, are popular with blue jays and white-breasted nuthatches. Offer them in a tray (shelled) or in a special peanut feeder (unshelled). Make sure they are unsalted for bird consumption.

Thistle or nyjer is offered specifically for birds like goldfinches, pine siskins, and redpolls. Make sure the seed is fresh and doesn't get wet and moldy or the birds will not eat it. Sometimes these finches will sit for hours gorging themselves on this seed.

You can add suet to the menu as well, both as raw and rendered into homemade forms, or purchased pre-packaged from the store. Woodpeckers will be your main visitors for these treats, but you'll also see that chickadees, titmice, brown creepers, and several warbler species may be attracted as well. Make sure to keep it out of the sun when it's extremely hot. Store-bought suet cakes hold up better in the heat.



Dye free sugar in water is all you need for these most tiny of dinner guests. [Photo courtesy of Amanda Nichols/Creative Commons.](#)

Finally, in order to attract hummingbirds, you will need to provide sugar water. No need to buy the mixture at the store. Regular, dye-free, white sugar in water is all you need. Four parts water, to one part sugar is the recipe. Avoid using sugar-substitutes, as well as brown and powdered sugars and honey. Just stick with granulated cane sugar and water.

How should you present all of these goodies to your guests? There are a lot of feeder options available, including platform, hopper, window, tube, nyjer, suet, and hummingbird feeders. Each has its advantages and disadvantages.

Platform feeders can be used by any sized bird, big or small. The disadvantages are that birds are more exposed to flying predators and the food is also exposed to the elements. That said, food not eaten quickly needs to be emptied if exposed to moisture.

Hopper feeders accommodate most birds and can be filled with generous amounts of seed. There are even designs that exclude squirrels. Most also have overhangs that may help keep the seed dry.

Window feeders, usually stuck on by suction cups, bring birds close for viewing. Most of these feeders don't hold much seed and larger birds like blue jays can empty them quickly.

Tube feeders come in various sizes for different purposes. Larger ones can hold any larger types of seeds, where small ones usually have tiny holes for nyjer. These feeders can accommodate many birds at one time.

Speaking of nyjer, it can be offered in a tube feeder or a soft sock made especially for this seed. These feeders need to be watched carefully so they don't get too wet.

Suet feeders are usually constructed with hardware cloth, so the suet is accessible. Some feeders are designed for woodpeckers to hang upside down to feed. They are designed to discourage starlings, because they also love suet. It's thought that starlings aren't crazy about hanging that way to feed, so it

keeps them from gobbling suet until it's gone.

Nowadays, hummingbird feeders come in an assortment of designs. The most important traits you want in this type of feeder is that it's easy to clean and has some red on it. Refill at least every three to five days, so the liquid doesn't go bad and make hummingbirds sick. Clean feeders at least once a week with hot water and a bottle brush. Don't use soap or detergent.

After stuffing themselves with all the scrumptious food, or any other time, birds may get a little thirsty. You'll want to offer some water. You may wish to go simple or elaborate. Simple could be as easy as putting out a sizable dish, filling it regularly. Some folks go all out by installing a pond. Either way, water is an incredible bird magnet. Trickling water is even more attractive. You may see some incredible birds visit your moving water. More diverse species than you've ever seen there before.

If you have the room and ambition, you may wish to landscape a bit in your yard with trees, shrubs, or flowers that offer natural bird food. Native plants are recommended since they are easier to maintain and grow easily in your yard's environment.

Trees and shrubs can add even more menu options for your guests, because birds love the flowers, berries, nuts, seeds, and insects they bring. Oaks provide nuts and insects, maples produce seeds and attract insects, crab apples provide flowers, berries, and insects, elderberries provide flowers and berries and dogwoods produce flowers and berries. Native plants have something for everyone!

Native prairie flowers are especially attractive, providing nectar and seed like wild bergamot, New England aster, blazing star, and black-eyed susan.

You wouldn't want to invite all these wonderful guests to your yard, only to cause them harm. Please do not offer bread, pastries or similar foods. These items are not nutritious and can cause digestive problems.

Also, avoid the use of inorganic pesticides. They not only affect the birds when they ingest them, they also eliminate their food source.

And if you're a pet owner, remember, keep cats indoors or confined to an area where they cannot reach birds. Your dinner guests will thank you as well as others that enjoy nature.

Follow these simple suggestions and you should have a memorable and successful avian dinner party with as many guests as you desire.