ATTRACTION, FEEDING, AND IDENTIFYING BACKYARD BIRDS

There are over 8900 species of birds in the world, with about 800 species on the North American continent. Most books list over 500 different types of birds which can be found in the United States. Because of our central location, Kansans can see an exceptionally diverse bird population. The ranges of many northern and southern birds extend into Kansas, while the range extensions of many eastern and western bird species also overlap here. The result is that Kansas ranks in the top 5 or 6 states for the total number of different bird species to have been recorded.

SIX EASY STEPS TO ATTRACT AND FEED BIRDS IN YOUR BACKYARD

1. Plant a variety of types of trees in the backyard. Not only different types of trees, but trees with different life spans and heights. In addition, a mix of deciduous and evergreens should be planted, including both juniper/cedar and arbor vitae. A variety of fruit (cherry, pear, peach, hawthorn, mountain ash, mulberry, and hackberry) and seed trees (maples, box elder, walnut, pecan) should be available, as well.

2. A diversity of shrubs is essential. For example, cardinals and catbirds will readily nest in japonica bushes, and Forsythia, or Spiraea shrubs. Check with your local county or state extension office about which trees and shrubs grow best in your area. Plant mostly those that provide food, cover, and nest materials or nesting sites. It is best to give those with red berries first priority, then black, blue-black, and blue, respectively. Pine trees tend to attract chickadees, grosbeaks, blue jays, siskins, nuthatches, sapsuckers and crossbills. Spruce trees are attractive to nuthatches and chickadees. Arbor vitae (white cedar) attracts siskins, and junipers (red cedar) attract grosbeaks, sapsuckers and cedar waxwings. All evergreens are useful in blocking north winter winds.

3. Desirable woody plants include greenbriar, which is attractive to catbirds, thrashers, robins, and mockingbirds. Mulberry is attractive to orioles, blue jays, and robins. Oaks attract blue jays, nuthatches, and red-headed woodpeckers. Blackberry and cherry attract cardinals, thrashers, grosbeaks, blue jays, robins, and waxwings. Hawthorn, mountain ash, and small crab apple trees especially attract waxwings and grosbeaks. Catbirds, flickers, kinglets, and sapsuckers are attracted to poison ivy (I seem to find it quite
easily too!). Holly is good to attract bluebirds, catbirds, mockingbirds, robins and thrashers, whereas grapes attract similar birds plus red-bellied woodpeckers. A widely planted tree, Russian olive, produces fruits eaten by grosbeaks, cardinals, and waxwings. Dogwoods, not only produce beautiful spring flowers, but are particularly attractive to cardinals, flickers, grosbeaks, thrashers, and waxwings.

4. Herbaceous plants and grasses such as: dropseed grass, crabgrass, panic grass, bristlegrass, knotweeds, pigweeds, and ragweeds are attractive to wintering sparrows (Harris', tree, song, fox, white-crowned, white-throated, and field) and juncos. Sunflowers and star thistles (Centaurea) are of special interest to goldfinches, siskins, blue jays, chickadees, and blackbirds.

5. Commerically available seeds and the birds that are attracted by the various types are indicated below. Bags of mixed bird seed are not recommended, as they often have seeds that are totally ignored by many birds, especially if the mix contains sunflower and millet seeds, which are more widely preferred by many birds. Individual seed types, purchased from a nursery or grain elevator, allow some selection of the species of birds you want most in your backyard. Unfortunately, all of these seeds will attract some of the less desirable or pest birds, such as starlings, cowbirds, grackles, red-wings and house sparrows:

Milo (sorghum) – most wintering sparrows, but also house sparrows, doves, starlings, cowbirds, grosbeaks, towhees, quail, and many other blackbirds.

Sunflower chips – particularly attract siskins and goldfinches when placed in hanging "finch-feeders." Also attract downy woodpeckers, chickadees, titmice, most finches, and house sparrows.
Sunflower seeds (large, white-stripped seeds) — cardinals, blue jays, chickadees, tufted titmouse, nuthatches, house sparrows, grosbeaks, red-bellied Woodpecker, and other finches (purple finch, house finch, and goldfinches).

Sunflower seeds (small, black "oil-type" seeds) — chickadees, nuthatches, most finches (goldfinches, house finch, purple finch).

Cracked corn — house sparrows, blackbirds, starlings, grackles, meadowlarks, bluebirds, quail, doves, most wintering sparrows, and juncos.

Suet — siskins, woodpeckers, flickers, nuthatches, starlings, chickadees, and blue jays.

Millet (red/white) — all wintering sparrows, juncos, house sparrows, cowbirds, blackbirds, starlings, blue jays, doves, and some finches.

Thistle seed — siskin, goldfinches and redpoll. (Sunflower chips are preferred when these birds are given a choice of both seeds in the same type of feeders.)

6. Other factors that can help attract birds include some of the following:

a. Keep brush piles and some snags available for wintering birds. Don't be too tidy when doing your fall yard cleaning.

b. Have good cover near feeders (trees and shrubs), but not flower gardens as these provide good cover for neighborhood cats.

c. Have a water bath — especially during freezing weather (add warm water several times daily or buy a commercial bird-bath heater).

d. Set up nest boxes — House wrens need several to choose from even though they nest in only one.

(Note you know why they always nest in your neighbor's wren box). For purple martin houses, evict house sparrows near mid-March, and close off the house until about early April.
RESOURCES

Attracting and Feeding


Bird Identification:


Bird Watching


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[Ed.'s note: The information in this article and the previous article on nature centers in the KST could help you plan a very effective schoolyard nature center. See Vol.4, no.1.]