

Garden bird feeding is a popular activity in the UK. The RSPB is regularly asked about the suitability of many food items as bird food. This leaflet attempts to answer some of the questions relating to these items, and highlights ways birds can be fed safely.

Hygiene

Whatever you feed birds with, good hygiene around feeders and bird baths is paramount all round the year, but particularly so during the summer months. The warmer weather can make food go off more quickly, and can provide ideal conditions for harmful bacteria to proliferate. It is important to clean feeders regularly, and to always exercise sensible hygiene care; clean the feeders out of doors, keep separate brushes for the purpose; wear gloves and wash hands once finished.

Mouldy or stale food

It is best not to give birds any mouldy foods. While many moulds are harmless, there are some that can cause respiratory infections in birds.

If food turns mouldy or stale on your birdtable, you are placing out too much. Always remove any stale or mouldy food – it provides a breeding ground for salmonella bacteria, which can cause food poisoning and death. Food left on the ground may attract rats, which can carry diseases that affect humans.

Fats

A wide variety of fats are suitable for bird feeding, but not all are suitable in warm weather and hence some should be restricted to winter use only.

Hard fats from cuts of meat (only use unsalted uncured varieties) can be put out in large pieces, from which birds can remove morsels. Make sure that these are well anchored to prevent large birds flying away with the whole piece. Only use this type of fat in the wintertime as warmer summer temperatures can make it go off and become a potential source of food poisoning.

Do not be tempted to use the fat from a meat roasting tin as bird food. The blend of meat juices and fat is too soft, and forms an ideal breeding ground for food poisoning bacteria.

Bird cake can be made at home using lard or beef suet, or can be bought from shops. Home made fat

balls/bird cake is only suitable for winter feeding, since the higher summer temperatures will soften the fat to the point that it may smear on birds' feathers, destroying their waterproofing and insulating qualities. The fat may also become rancid relatively quickly in the warm weather. The commercially produced fat bars are made from beef tallow or pork fat treated in a way that keeps the fat hard in summer temperatures, making them suitable for year round feeding. Aim to have the fat bar eaten within three weeks of hanging it out in the summer. That way it should stay fresh to the end.

Polyunsaturated margarines or vegetable oils are unsuitable for birds. They contain considerably less energy, and can easily be smeared onto the feathers. Because birds have a high metabolic rate, they need saturated fats with high energy content, such as raw suet and lard, in order to maintain their body reserves.

Peanuts

Peanuts are rich in fats and are a valued food during the winter and cold spring months. Never place out loose nuts, especially during the breeding season, but offer them either enclosed in a rigid mesh feeder from which birds are only able to extract small pieces, or finely chopped in a seed mix.

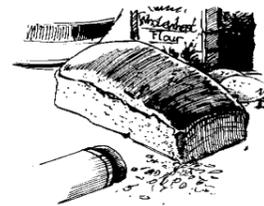
Salted peanuts should never be given to birds.

Aflatoxin is a poison produced by a fungus, which can occur on peanuts in their country of origin. It is a powerful toxin, harmful to people and birds. Only buy nuts from a reputable dealer, who can guarantee that the nuts are free from aflatoxin.

Bread

All types of bread are acceptable to birds as one component in a varied diet. Bread does not contain the necessary protein, fat, vitamins and minerals birds need, and so it can act as an empty filler. A bird on a diet of predominantly or only bread can suffer from serious vitamin deficiencies or starve.

Only put out an amount that birds will eat in a day. Bread left on the ground overnight



can attract rats. Moist bread is better than stale dry bread, and brown bread is better than white. During the breeding season, crumble the bread into tiny pieces so that it is only eaten by the adult birds, and only put out small amounts at a time. Dry chunks of bread can choke baby birds, and a chick on a diet of bread may not develop into a healthy fledgling.

Milk

Never give milk to any bird. A bird's gut is not designed to digest milk, which can cause a serious stomach upset or even death. Birds can, however, digest fermented dairy products such as cheese, which attract robins, wrens and dunnocks.

Coconut

Desiccated coconut should never be given to birds as it may swell once inside a bird and cause death. Fresh coconut in the shell is OK. Rinse out any residues of the sweet coconut water before hanging it out to prevent the build-up of black mildew.

Meat and petfood

Whatever meat product is offered to birds, it must be put out in small quantities that are eaten within an hour or two before it has time to dry out or go off before being eaten. Meat left in warm weather for extended periods can go off and even cause food poisoning. Meat products can attract magpies, gulls and neighbourhood cats, and if left on the ground overnight may also attract rats. If there is likely to be a problem, meat is best avoided.

Cut fresh meat into short narrow strips (to resemble a worm or a caterpillar) or chop it finely, since this makes it easiest for the birds to manipulate and eat it. Salted, smoked or cured meats should not be used at all. Fresh unsalted bacon can be given, but make sure it is finely chopped. Tinned meaty dog and cat food can be useful to certain birds. Don't offer dry biscuits.

Rice

Cooked rice, brown or white (without salt added) is beneficial and readily accepted by all species. Uncooked rice may be eaten by birds such as pigeons, doves and pheasants but is less likely to attract other species.

Salt

Garden birds are unable to metabolise salt, which in

high quantity is toxic, affecting the nervous system. Under normal circumstances in the wild, birds are unlikely to take harmful amounts of salt. Never put out salted food onto the bird table, and never add salt or anything else to bird baths to keep the water ice-free in the winter.

Melon or pumpkin seed

While these are not harmful to birds and might well provide good nutrition, birds rarely take them.

Breakfast cereal

These are good for birds. Offer them crushed up and dry in small quantities at a time with a source of water available. Birds tend to ignore any cereal that has gone wet and mushy. Porridge oats should only be given straight out of the packet. Never give birds cooked porridge, since it can be too glutinous.

Feeding in the breeding season

Birds time their breeding period to exploit the availability of natural foods. Weather conditions can create food shortages at any time during spring and summer. If this occurs whilst birds have young in the nest, easy food on birdtables helps to make up the shortfall, initially to feed themselves, but if the situation gets bad enough, they will also take the food to the nest.

If the food offered on bird tables is not suitable for the young chicks, it can do more harm than good, and can even be lethal to the chicks as they can choke on the food. Therefore, only offer foods that chicks can safely eat. Never put out loose peanuts (whole or in large chunks, dry hard foods or large pieces of bread during the spring and summer months.

Safe foods include:

Any wild bird seed mixes, but make sure these do NOT contain peanuts bigger than granule size, or dog biscuit.

Sunflower seeds

Sunflower hearts

Mild grated cheese

Sultanas, raisins and currants (soak these overnight)

Pinhead oatmeal

Apples, pears, plums, grapes and other soft fruit

Mealworms and waxworms



INFORMATION Food fit for birds?

The RSPB

UK Headquarters, The Lodge, Sandy, Bedfordshire SG19 2DL. Telephone 01767 693690

Northern Ireland Headquarters, Belvoir Park Forest, Belfast BT8 7QT. Telephone 028 9049 1547

Scotland Headquarters, 25 Ravelston Terrace, Edinburgh EH4 3TP. Telephone 0131 311 6500

Wales Headquarters, Sutherland House, Castlebridge, Cowbridge Road East, Cardiff CF11 9AB. Telephone 029 2035 3000

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