

**To feed or not to feed?  
Birds I View  
Bill Montevecchi**



American goldfinches are attracted to feeders with thistle seed [photo: Gene Herzberg]

That is the question but what is the answer? Though it's been a long-standing concern, discussion about the negative consequences of feeding birds flared up this summer when birds were dying due to lethal parasite transmission at feeders. Recent discussion on CBC Radio's On the Go program made compelling points about the negative consequences of feeding birds at any time of year.

At the base of it all, the consideration that needs attention is the role we play in shaping wildlife patterns and survival rather than letting nature run its own course.

**The case against feeding birds**

Bird-feeding has been dampening pressures on seed-eating finches and sparrows to migrate southward during autumn. Consequently, seed-eaters are over-wintering in locations from which they previously migrated and their ranges are expanding northward. Climate warming is also exacerbating these trends. During recent decades, cardinals and tufted titmice have begun nesting in Atlantic Canada and are expected to arrive here sooner rather than later.

Bird-feeders provide "food oases" in winter leading to unnatural spatially concentrated aggregations. These avian crowds in turn create feeding sites for hawks and merlins that patrol neighborhoods searching from feeder to feeder. Mice and voles that are attracted to the seeds at feeders can lure hungry owls, especially when ice and hard-freeze conditions give them few options for finding prey in heavily crusted snow. Bird-feeding has thereby allowed many birds of

prey to overwinter in more northerly areas from which they too would have previously migrated.

Cats exploit bird-feeders and inflict a heavy toll on the hungry visitors. Domestic and feral cats are by far and away THE major source of bird deaths in North America – far outdistancing collisions with illuminated buildings, pollution, forestry, hunting and wind farms. Feeders also attract rats that have been known to kill birds on site.

Bird-feeders near houses increase the incidence of collisions with windows. When birds are frightened they fly toward light which usually indicates open space between trees and branches that provide escape routes from pursuing hawks. Birds flushing from feeders use the same strategy though in many cases the light is coming through solid glass windows rather than through open spaces among the trees. These collisions can be lethal often incurring spinal injuries, concussions and the like.

Yet likely the greatest threat from bird-feeders come from “casual” feeders who feed inconsistently creating an avian dependency but then not providing food for feeder-dependent birds. These threats are extreme during ice storms when feeders freeze over and have to be de-iced and restocked. If this is not done then the feeding charade will only cause unnecessary suffering and death.

As well, parasite and disease transmission is not restricted to summer. And feeders can create year-round health risks as well as sustenance.

### **The case for feeding birds**

As a biologist, this is a more difficult case to make. Certainly watching birds at feeders can be breathe-takingly fascinating and insightful. Programs like Bird Study Canada’s Feeder Watch Program generates a citizens’ science awareness that can help instill understanding of the diversity of birds and hopefully their needs for habitat protection.

I am aware of numerous cases in which nature-lovers and others confined by circumstance gain great pleasure by having birds in their immediate realm. I hope some of these feelings expand to conservation considerations. We desperately need to protect boreal forest habitat that our suburban and developmental sprawl continually devalues and destroys.

### **The conclusion**

In the ledger of pros and cons about feeding birds, it is clear that from an environmental and ecological perspective, the case against feeding is the compelling one. There seems to be little purpose for feeding birds in summer and perhaps at any time for anything other than for personal enjoyment and awareness.

With all these negative considerations, it is clear that feeding birds does not put anyone in a league with Mother Teresa. And bird-feeding like hunting has to be viewed as what it is – an exploitation of wildlife for personal benefit. The benefit in this case being wonderment, entertainment and hopefully insight.

In the grand scheme of things we have completely transformed the land- and seascapes with our activities. Massive artificial food situations have been and are being created by agriculture, fishing and landfills that extend well beyond the scales of bird-feeding influences throughout Canada and the world.

### **My decision**

After the frosts of winter have set in and most migrants have long-departed our environs, I will feed birds. I will put out black oil sunflower seeds for finches, jays, juncos, chickadees and nuthatches; millet and thistle for tiny seed-eaters like siskins and goldfinches, and suet for the flickers, woodpeckers, chickadees and others.

In sum, the negative effects of feeding birds pale in comparison to the ongoing business-as-usual illegal environmental destruction committed by town councils throughout the Northeast Avalon. Clear-cutting forests to the water's edge along rivers, ponds and streams is standard practice in housing, commercial and industrial developments. Town councils are blind to environmental legislation and the provincial environmental and water protection agencies are too impotent to enforce and even acknowledge the regulations for which they are responsible.

So feed the birds if you will and in the process try to embrace some environment awareness and appreciation that might help temper the ongoing environmental desecration.

### **Birds in the area**

I have received a number of calls about the Canada goose that was stuck in the ice on Shoe Cove Pond in Pouch Cove. Anita Stoeterau informed me that the goose was rescued by some intrepid souls who launched a boat in the ice and freed the bird from its icy bonds. Residents are putting out food for the goose that has been resident at the pond since summer. It is unknown if the goose can fly. If it cannot, the responsive crew from Salmonier Nature Park might help relocate the goose to a safer haven.

The local bird count is being carried out on Boxing Day [26 December]. If you want to participate or just want to keep a personal tally of birds that you see around your house, at your feeders or elsewhere let me know.

Jesus Christ – it's Christmas again, and it's a most reasonable time lend a loving and helping hand now and on into the new year. We can all be the better for it. Godspeed.

Birds I View columns are available at <http://play.psych.mun.ca/~mont/outreach.html>.  
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