

Feed the birds? Or not?

Dr W. Richard J. Dean

Everyone, or almost everyone, likes to have birds in the garden. Maybe not all birds are welcome, but the attractive, charismatic birds that sing in the early morning are always a pleasure to hear and watch, and the presence of birds fosters a connection with nature that we all need. Feeding the birds generates the perception in your mind that you are helping, in your way, to benefit the birds by giving them a benign environment, with free meals, in which to live. The question arises about whether or not to feed the birds to keep them in your garden, or to let them find their own way. Are we really helping the birds or helping ourselves?

If you do feel the need to feed the birds, what food do you give them? Putting out seed is not such a good idea, and attracts such birds as Laughing Doves (rare outside the village) and Speckled Pigeons, now becoming a nuisance with their roosting and nesting on houses and the mess that they make with their droppings. Putting a pawpaw on a stick in the right place will bring barbets and mousebirds, and a serving of meal worms brings robin-chats and fiscal flycatchers and wagtails. Planting shrubs that produce copious nectar, such as wild dagga, tecoma, and aloes are good for sunbirds and will keep these attractive little birds in your garden as long as there are flowers. Is this a grey area? Is planting bird-friendly shrubs and trees feeding the birds or not? No, it is a useful way of creating a bird-friendly garden, the best way, without actually putting out food, to get your garden bird list better than them next door. Fresh water for the birds is a good alternative to feeding. A shallow basin bird bath placed in an open site in dappled shade is good, and a basin on a pedestal is highly recommended to avoid the bird bath becoming a snack bar for a cat.

We get back to the central question, are we helping birds by giving them food, or are we tipping the “balance of nature” such that with food we increase numbers of less than charismatic species to the detriment of other species, the ones that we would rather like to see and hear twittering on the wash line or singing a tone poem? By feeding the birds are we bringing birds artificially to a central place with all the problems that this may cause? Are we creating an “avi-culture” of free loaders, birds that simply hang around waiting to be fed, rather than foraging for themselves and benefitting the garden owner by eating potentially harmful insects?

Recent research in Europe is finding evidence that feeding birds has consequences that reach beyond your garden. The effects of putting out food are generally positive – survival and population growth in some species may increase, but the down sides, for example the transmission of diseases by bringing birds that are naturally rather solitary together at the food bowl, may have other, not so desirable consequences. Did the bumble-foot on your Cape Wagtails (quite common in our local wagtails, and caused by mites) come from hanging-out with other, less hygienic wagtails at a popular feeding place, or what? Also not so desirable is that by using food to attract birds into your garden increases the number of birds in a small area, making it easier for the predators, such

as sparrowhawks, common fiscal shrikes and bokmakieries, all of which kill and eat small birds, to catch their prey. Of course food is not put out for the predators, but in fact it is provided for them in the form of concentrating their prey.

There are several guidelines on the internet for creating a bird friendly garden. The bottom line in all of them is “don't feed the birds directly, but create a bird-friendly environment with shrubs and trees”. However, if you do insist on feeding birds in your garden, make sure that the food is placed high and out of reach of cats or other predators. Food should be good quality – no bread - and seed should be millet or sunflower, rather than crushed mealies. Varying the time of day when food is put out is good, and varying the types of food is also recommended – this to avoid setting up a pattern that will be noticed by predators. Keep an eye on which birds are visiting the feeder, and if you are only getting queleas and bishop-birds, then stop feeding for a while.

If you really enjoy feeding the birds, follow the rules, keep in mind the caveats, and know that it is largely to satisfy your soul, and not necessarily theirs. A free lunch, however, is always welcome, and good for the psyche. ●

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Speckled Pigeon



Laughing Dove