

## MODULE 3: WHAT DO I EAT

### Using bird feeders to help and to attract birds

There has been a serious countrywide decline in the numbers of many birds, including many well known and loved species. This decline has been slow and gradual, rather than sudden. Most of the declining species are farmland birds. Most woodland species such as the blue tit and nuthatch are still doing alright though there is evidence of decline in some species.

Extensive research has shown that these declines are caused primarily by changes in agriculture. These include grubbing up hedges to create larger fields and draining wet areas, shifting from spring to autumn sown crops and an increase in use of fertilisers and pesticides.

Research has also proved that gardens are becoming increasingly important for some of the species in decline, and many more people are now helping by regularly feeding birds. Bird tables and feeders are especially effective in helping birds over winter when food is not so abundant.

Providing bird feeders in your school grounds will not only help local birds but will also attract them and provide several learning opportunities. These include learning about different species, what they eat and how they are adapted to certain foods and habitats; gaining skills in making bird feeders and the discipline of maintaining them; opportunities to observe birds regularly and learn to identify them.

There are many ways to make effective but cheap feeders and instructions are included in this module. Below are some tips on which foods should be provided and crucially the importance of hygiene in relation to feeders. There is lots more advice at <http://www.rspb.org.uk/makeahomeforwildlife/advice/helpingbirds/feeding/index.aspx>

#### **Tips on bird feeders and tables**

- Bird-tables should be constructed so that they are high enough off the ground to be out of the way of cats. You can deter squirrels and other unwanted visitors by putting a guard around the pole.
- Food that you can put out on bird-tables includes grated cheese, dried fruit (although this should be soaked in water overnight first) and wet bread.
- Wild bird seed for bird feeders can be bought from pet shops. You might also want to use sunflower seeds or shelled peanuts.
- Bird seed mixes vary in what they contain and different ones may attract different species. The better types contain flaked maize, sunflower seeds and peanut granules.
- Breakfast cereals can be used, but only put out small quantities at a time and always accompanied by a water supply. Uncooked porridge oats are often used, but do not put it out if cooked.
- Avoid mixes with beans or lentils. Do not use dry rice or desiccated coconut (fresh coconut is suitable though) as this will swell in the bird's crop.
- Never give milk to birds as it can cause stomach upsets or even death.
- Do not use margarine or a low fat alternative to lard when making bird cake. Birds need a high amount of fat in their diets over winter and so these would

not be suitable. Also the soft fats are easily smeared over the feathers, compromising their waterproofing and insulating qualities.

- Birds need water as well and this is best provided in shallow dishes.
- It is best to use feeders and tables over autumn and winter months as food tends to go off quicker in summer and you will need to clean them more often. Also, the food you put out during the spring and summer months might be dangerous to young chicks. Never put out loose peanuts, dry or hard foods, large chunks of food or fats out during this time.
- If you get into the habit of regularly providing food for the birds, try not to stop as the birds may come to rely on the food you put out.

### **IMPORTANT HYGIENE INFORMATION**

- It is very important that you clean your bird table regularly.
- Clean away any droppings and uneaten food before it goes stale or mouldy. Mouldy food can cause respiratory infections in birds. Clean and wash your bird feeders and bird-tables with a 5% disinfectant solution. If possible, move them around each month to prevent build up of droppings underneath.
- If any food is being left to get mouldy it is likely that you are putting out too much food. Try reducing the amounts that you are providing.
- If children are handling the food and bird table make sure they wash their hands afterwards.
- Scattered food on the floor can attract rats and mice.
- Clean out water containers regularly and allow them to dry out before adding more water.
- Remember to clean bird feeders, tables and water containers outside, not inside and wear gloves.