

Who's At Your Bird Feeder?

Millions of people from across the world feed the birds in their yards and neighbourhoods. In 2013, Statistics Canada reported that 25% of all Canadian households had bird feeders or bird houses in their yards. While feeding wildlife is generally discouraged to reduce animal-human encounters (bear-watching is not nearly as recommended at bird-watching) and reduce animal dependence on human food sources, bird feeding is an exception. Birds do not become dependent on bird feeders, and instead incorporate them into a feeding route that they visit while they forage. Bird feeding has become so ubiquitous that many trusted Canadian wildlife institutions offer helpful tips for how to best set up and maintain bird feeders.

The assumption has always been that the birds benefit from our food. A study by Galbraith et al. (2107), however, found that bird feeders in New Zealand were most frequently visited by two introduced species (both in frequency and with the largest conspecific group sizes). The increase in the population of the introduced species came at the expense of the native species that did not eat the human-offered food sources. The authors suggested that the territories of some native birds were being taken over by hundreds of invasive birds.

Given that two of the most common visitors to Ontario bird feeders are house sparrows (*Passer domesticus*) and common starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*), and both are invasive species, how will this information change your use of bird feeders?

Now you Try:

One easy solution is to offer foods that native species have always relied on and is not as readily used by these avian invaders.

The coneflower (*Echinacea purpurea*) is a common addition to Ontario gardens. It's everything you can want in a flower: easy to acquire (all garden stores sell them), pretty (it comes in purple, white, red, yellow, and orange), perennial (plus it self-seeds, so you'll always have it around), and hardy (they grow best in well-drained soil, prefer full sun, are drought tolerant, and have few pests). In the fall, when the flowers are done, birds feast on the seeds left behind on the cone-shaped flower head. Keep the seed heads out all winter, and prepare to see native blue jays, cardinals, and especially goldfinches feasting on your coneflower seeds..

References:

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