

BirdLife Australia's Supplementary Food and Water Advice

Supplementary Feeding

The issue of bird feeding is a very controversial one. Many people enjoy feeding birds in their garden, on their balcony or even at their windowsill, but this creates many unseen problems such as malnutrition, disease, and unbalanced populations of some species. In the aftermath of the fires, though, birds and other wildlife may be in need of short-term supplementary food and water, and in the long-term, habitat that will provide those resources naturally.

If you are going to feed birds, you should be aware of potential problems and consider how you can minimise the risk of harming the wildlife you want to help.

Dependency

Firstly, it is a myth that birds become dependant on us for food. Except in very rare circumstances, research shows that birds continue to search naturally for food even whilst getting supplementary food. In cases of extreme events such as bushfires, providing food, and more importantly water, is particularly important for the survival of wildlife and the birds may rely on you for a short period of time. Putting food out for birds after fire shouldn't be seen as a long-term solution. Instead it is a helping hand as their natural resources regenerate and recover.

Malnutrition

The types of foods we put out for birds are very rarely what they find naturally. There are a few items in particular that are known to cause problems for birds and should be avoided.

Mince: This might seem like a treat but it lacks important nutrients that carnivorous birds would normally obtain from their natural diet of insects and the fur and bones of small mammals. Huge problems can arise if the adult birds raise their young on this diet as the juvenile birds can suffer from brittle bones due to insufficient calcium. Mince can also stick to the beaks of birds like Kookaburras and Tawny Frogmouths, leading to bacterial infection. If you feed other meat to birds, add a calcium supplement to it.

Honey/water mixes: These do not provide the complex sugars that a bird would get from the nectar of a flower.

Bread: This is just a filler. It contains nothing of nutritional value and instead simply fills the bird up.



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Keep Count!

We need to know how birds are recovering post fires. You can help by doing a general Birddata or Birds in Backyards survey via the Birddata portal (www.birddata.birdlife.org.au) or app.

Disease

Disease transition is a real risk with bird feeding and there have been outbreaks of illness overseas linked to bird feeders. Given the stress birds are currently under they are likely to be particularly susceptible. Ensure that you keep the area where they are fed very clean and well scrubbed daily using a dilute bleach solution or specific wildlife disinfectant.

Our parrots in particular can spread Psittacine beak and feather disease at unhygienic feeding stations, especially where large numbers of birds gather. The virus attacks the feather follicles and the cells that grow beaks and claws. Feathers become malformed and eventually fall out whilst beaks and claws grow uncontrollably and can crack and break, leading to infections and potentially stop the bird from being able to feed.

Beak and feather disease also suppresses the immune system, opening the bird up to a range of secondary infections. Those mangy, balding Sulphur-crested Cockatoos that you may occasionally see are infected with disease. If you do have parrots with beak and feather disease visiting, immediately cease feeding and clean your feed station. You may also wish to contact your local wildlife rescue group if the bird is very sick and needs to be captured for treatment.

Unbalanced populations

Think about the birds that we feed - they are usually the ones doing well anyway, the omnivorous (eat anything) opportunists such as Currawongs, Kookaburras and Magpies. Increased numbers of these larger, more aggressive birds can be attributed to artificial feeding. For example, Pied Currawongs and Magpies have increased dramatically in numbers over time, forcing out smaller species from many areas. Currawongs eat the eggs and chicks of small birds. Rainbow Lorikeets outcompete other hollow-nesting birds.

The quantity of food available also helps those being artificially fed to become very successful breeders, increasing their numbers further, which puts even more pressure on the smaller birds. Small honeyeaters, insectivores and seed-eaters can often be more difficult to attract to feed stations. There are also some species that simply don't come to feed stations as they have very specific food requirements. Glossy Black-Cockatoos are the classic example – they only eat the seeds from a couple of Casuarina species.

So what can you do?

We know that people take great joy from feeding birds and that connection to nature is really important. In times after fires, there will be a shortage of food and so supplementary feeding may be a short-term solution you can offer. Be aware of the potential problems though and observe the following 'rules of thumb':

- Feed stations should be placed out of the reach of cats and other predators
- Watch what you are feeding. If you are only feeding your typical successful urban birds (like Rainbow Lorikeets and Sulphur-crested Cockatoos) that are doing well anyway, change the type of food you are providing or stop feeding altogether
- If you are feeding quieter/shyer birds, put the feeder in a quiet place in the garden
- Clean feeding stations daily by brushing off excess food, washing and scrubbing with a dilute bleach solution (and rinsing again)
- Vary the time of day in which you provide the food
- You can use multiple feeding stations for different types of food
- Think about what other wildlife you might be feeding. Kangaroos and wallabies can suffer from 'lumpy jaw' if they eat bird seed –

so ensure feeders with bird seed are out of reach

- Cease feeding if large flocks (20+) birds begin feeding at the same time and you observe for any illness in the birds you are feeding
- Pets should be fed indoors or remaining food removed. Common Mynas and other birds regularly eat pet food so we should limit their access to it
- Feed stations can sometimes attract rats and mice. Don't put out rodenticides as these can poison owls and other carnivorous birds
- Remember that this is a temporary help you are offering the birds. Be sure to taper off on feeding as the bush regenerate
- Consider planting more native species in your garden to create natural feeding resources

Bird Baths and Water

Providing water in your yard that birds (and other wildlife) can safely access is an easy but important way to help out. Birds will not only need water to drink, but some will also need to bathe. Bathing allows birds to remove parasites and dirt and generally maintain their feathers.

You don't need to go out and buy a fancy bird bath (though by all means buy one if you like). Instead, look at what you have around your home (or check out the local op shop) that you can put to use. Pot saucers, tubs, buckets, hanging pots, upside down bin lids, ceramic dishes, kids clam shell pools – all make great options (avoid metal as it can heat up too much). Different depths and types of baths provide lots of options for different birds. Be sure to:

- Place them in the shade around the garden at various heights - on the ground, on a pedestal, hanging from a tree
- Keep them close to shrubs and trees so birds can have an escape route
- Put rocks, a brick or a branch in the water, especially if the bath is smooth and slippery so anything that falls in can climb out
- Change the water daily or whenever it gets hot where practical
- Keep cats indoors and if you have a dog, place the baths in an area where it cannot access

Food Type	Birds	Notes
Nectar mix (wet or dry)	Honeyeaters, Parrots	Spoils very quickly. Discard within 1 hour. Avoid using this food if you cannot clean it up quickly
Fruit	Parrots, Pigeons/Doves, Bowerbirds	
Mealworms + other insects	Insect-eaters (Fantails, Willie Wagtails, Fairy-wrens, Scrub-wrens), Magpies, Butcherbirds, some Honeyeaters	Available from pet supply stores live or freeze-dried
Seed	Parrots (Cockatoos, Galahs, Corellas, Rosellas), Finches, Pigeons/Doves	Avoid large amounts of sunflower seeds (very fatty). Ensure seed stations are out of reach of Kangaroos and Wallabies
Dog kibble, dog roll, raw meat	Magpies, Ravens/Crows, Butcherbirds, Currawongs, Kookaburras	Consider the impact they may have by hunting smaller birds. Add a calcium supplement like Wombaroo Insectivore Mix

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With our specialised knowledge and the commitment of an Australia-wide network of volunteers and supporters, we are creating a bright future for Australia's birds.

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