

Making a bird bath

And a reminder of other things we can do to help the local birds stay healthy

Below we are going to list a few things which we sometimes forget about when helping out our garden visitors—including making a homemade bird bath, remembering to clean the bird feeders and giving the birds the right sorts of food.

Please only put a bird bath out and carry out these other tasks on your own private land, or where you have permission from the landowner. When collecting materials and resources, please do this responsibly and sensibly. Please don't damage living things.

This activity can be changed to suit the space that you have, and we are only going to offer a few examples (please feel free to research more).



JOHN MUIR DISCOVER AWARD Summer Holiday Family Challenge



Making a bird bath!

We always remember to help birds by providing them with more food, but we sometimes forget we could also offer them a quick drink or a washing opportunity—particularly in warmer weather.

Resources and materials that could be used (but you may be more creative and think of other things):

- Something relatively shallow, and watertight that can be used as the bath—like an upturned dustbin lid. Recommended to have shallow sloping sides, and a max depth of around 10cm, with a width of at least 30cm across. Don't worry if your vessel isn't quite like this however, the most important point is that it is not too deep!
- Stones or gravel
- Something to hold the bath steady if it doesn't have a flat base
- Water from indoor or outdoor tap

How to:

- Find a suitable location for your bird bath. Think about predators and dangers to birds, such as cats, you don't want to put it close to a bush or area which a cat can jump out of and pounce. If possible place it in an area where the birds will have full view of their surroundings, so that if they do suspect danger they can fly off quickly.
- Once a location has been identified, use bricks or other supports to ensure your bird bath will be stable. Think about all weather conditions, and any other larger animals which could disturb it or equally happily try to use it.
- Place down the vessel you are using for the bird bath.
- Add some stones or gravel into it, to make it less smooth and so birds can get good grip if they need to.
- Fill up the bath with water! Remember to keep a close eye on it, keep topping it up in summer and also replace the water if it starts to look a bit green or brown. In winter, if the water freezes make sure you break the ice (using a small object like a ball is a great way to prevent it freezing up in the first place). Please NEVER use de-icer or salt.
- Watch to see what uses the bird bath!



Even if you can't find something for a larger bird bath, every little helps! I have these small glass jars (which used to hold desserts) out for the smaller birds, such as my neighbouring sparrows.. Not ideal for anything larger than a sparrow, and they need more cleaning because they are smaller—but they are still used!

Clean your bird feeder and bird table!

There is a risk that, if lots of birds feed from one place (e.g. your garden), disease can spread quickly amongst them. But there are things we can do to try and prevent that!

Bird diseases tend to spread via bird droppings, so if possible, keep your bird tables and the surrounding areas relatively clean and free from droppings. By moving your table or feeders around your outdoor space, you can prevent large amounts of droppings in one area.

Try to wash bird tables and feeders regularly. You can use a 5% disinfectant solution when doing this.

Monitor the food supply, remove any food that is mouldy and if it isn't being eaten very quickly reduce the amount of food you are putting out.

Whenever cleaning a bird table or feeder, always do this outside with separate tools or utensils from anything that you use inside. Whenever cleaning for the birds please always wear gloves and ensure you wash your hands thoroughly afterwards—personal hygiene is super important to!



What to feed (and what not to feed) the birds

Birds can be quite picky, and some species like other types of food more than others! You may put food out that you know definitely gets eaten or just whatever you have in. But some foods are definitely better than others!

Seed Mixtures— there are lots of different seed mixes available specifically for birds. These may include things like millet, flaked maize, peanuts and sunflower seeds. Try and avoid mixes with larger contributions such as beans or dried rice, as only larger species can eat these.

Single seeds— some birds particularly enjoy certain types of seeds, so these may be put out as just a single seed food source. These may include black sunflower seeds, peanuts or nyjer seeds.

Live foods—mealworms are a favourite for the insect eating birds, and these can be available to purchase throughout the year.

Dog and cat food—Meaty tinned dog or cat food can be a good substitute to earth worms, but never put out dry pet biscuits for birds as they are too large and dry for them to swallow. Pet food can also attract more problematic, larger birds such as magpies and gulls— and of course cats! So we would only suggest putting out pet food if these things wouldn't be an issue.

Rice and cereals—Cooked rice can be a good food to provide in winter weather (but it must be cooked!) And left over dry breakfast cereals can be offered, but only small amounts at a time

Fats, margarines and oils—Please don't give birds left over fat from cooking—the fat has mixed in with other food that may not be good for the birds. Lard and beef suet are fine on their own—and we would suggest using lard or suet when making bird feeders. Also be careful when using polyunsaturated margarines or vegetable oils, as these soft fats can easily get onto feathers, reducing their waterproof and insulating qualities.

Cheese—cheese is a particular favourite for robins! Even though birds can digest fermented dairy products, they cannot digest milk so please don't feed milk to birds (or any other garden visitor for that matter!).

Bread—leftover bread is OKAY for the birds—as long as it is given in small amounts and isn't the main food source provided. Bread provides very little nutritional value to birds. Soaked bread is better than dry bread and brown is better than white! Please don't feed bread to ducks down at your local pond, park, canal or river. As well as providing little benefits to birds, left over bread can also cause algal build up and other issues in the water itself,

This information has been taken from <https://www.rspb.org.uk/birds-and-wildlife/advice/how-you-can-help-birds/feeding-birds/safe-food-for-birds/>. Find out more from the RSPB website.

