

A Passion for Feeding Birds



Text and Photos by Al Cornell

Animated bits of color contrast with the demeanor of a blustery winter day. Feeding birds furnishes entertainment and the satisfaction that comes from providing a source of energy to heat their tiny engines on frigid days. Of course, bird feeding can be a year-round activity, but it reaches its height of relevance in the winter.

Many of the birds that perch on the REC lines in the village of Orion drop down into the Meehans' yard to fuel up. Lorin puts out sunflower seed in the front and back yards near escape shrubbery. Angel directs Lily to a chair near a window where she is entertained by the charm of the bird world.

I know that Lily really gets into bird watching. When I asked her which bird was her favorite, she responded, "Brown." When we learn to appreciate

the brown birds, we are devoted to birds. Angel preferred a summer visitor, the indigo bunting. Lorin went for big red, the cardinal.

The four-pawed members of the household frequently watch birds. Angel said, "The cats are well entertained and happy when birds are feeding near a window." Bird watching impels a constant twitching of the end of the cats' tails.



Angel shows Lily pictures of the birds at the feeders.

Bird feeding provides a relatively inexpensive source of entertainment. Lorin said, "I like to watch them work on the sunflower seeds. They hold them with their toes, peck them apart, discard the husk, and eat the kernel that is inside." An exception is the cardinal that uses its tongue to situate a sunflower seed between its upper and lower mandibles. Then it pops the seed open and eats just the kernel.



Lily enjoys climbing onto Dad's lap for a better view. Angel grabs a bird guide and shows Lily which birds are coming to the feeders. Then a couple cats join the group and the tail twitching ensues.

Angel quickly compiled a list of 24 species that have visited feeders in their yard. Favorites include downy and red-bellied woodpeckers, cardinals, blue jays, chickadees, nuthatches, gold finches, juncos, and tree sparrows. Memorable summer visitors include hummingbirds, orioles, indigo buntings, and scarlet tanagers.

The shrubs in their lawn provide the birds with valuable escape cover for getting away from sharp-shinned hawks that occasionally dive in, hoping to capture a meal. Bird feeders can reduce survival in small birds if they lure those birds into open areas where they are more vulnerable to hawk predation. To those beginning to feed birds, Angel says, "The most important piece of advice I can give is to set the feeders near good perches and escape cover so the birds can avoid hawk attacks."

Squirrels can be a major problem when they dominate the feeders. There are several solutions to the squirrel problem. Some commercial feeders are squirrel proof,

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Clockwise, starting right: Black-capped chickadees are attracted to bird feeders; a purple finch adds color to a stormy winter day; nuthatches come for suet and sunflower seeds. Opposite page: Cardinals add their bright spots to winter days.



Below: Lorin keeps the feeders well stocked. Right: Lily watches birds at the feeders.



Feeding Birds

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though squirrels can be very persistent. However, some people just add squirrels to the list of critters to enjoy and then make sure there are enough feeders to accommodate them without chasing off all the birds. Lily loves the squirrels, and Lorin says, “A squirrel sometimes hangs upside down between two feeders. It takes a seed from one feeder and then alternates to the other feeder. Some of their antics are really cute.”

Sometimes feeders are raided by night bandits. Raccoons often feed on sunflower seed where it is accessible. However, Lorin discovered that raccoons were taking the suet blocks he put out. Yet, overall the targeted birds remain the primary uses of his sunflower seed and the suet blocks.

Birds utilize different food sources seasonally. The Meehans feed black-seeded sunflower seed for most winter birds. They tried a wild bird mix, but most of the seeds were just discarded and knocked to the ground. They add suet blocks that are a good source of high-energy food for woodpeckers, chickadees, nuthatches, and blue jays.

In summer, orioles, tanagers, and

buntings come to oranges cut in two. Hummingbirds are a special attraction. They come to hummingbird feeders filled with a sugar solution when they aren't sipping nectar from the flowers.

Each species of bird exhibits peculiar feeding habits. Cardinals are most active at dawn and dusk. Angel pointed out that they like to feed on the ground alongside juncos and gold finches.

Blue jays appear to swallow many sunflower seeds.

They actually load up their gullet and transport them to another area to cache. Those seeds are used later by the blue jay that hid them or some other critter. They are sometimes called Johnny Appleseed birds because they plant many acorns that grow into oak trees. Like the other birds, when jays are feeding, they break the seed open and eat the kernel.

For the Meehans, bird feeding adds a flair that reduces the doldrums of winter. It also brings a distinct display to their backyard during the summer. It appears that Lily will grow up experiencing some of the great advantages of our rural community. She will be exposed to our great outdoors along with the electronics of our modern age.

And the birds will be fed. ■



An entertained cat.



Christmas Program Memories

I remember so well the Christmas programs at the country school that I attended, but one memory stands out among the rest. I recall Mrs. Jenks' words as if they were yesterday: "When we do the Nativity scene, there will be no giggling, no snickering, no poking each other, no whispering. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Mrs. Jenks," we said in unison.

And so it came to pass. The night of the annual Christmas program arrived and it was going well. People laughed at the right places. They clapped after each performance, loud and long. But now it was time for the nativity scene, that most important event. That part of

The mouse crawled down the piano, then paraded across the stage, stopping dead center, only a few feet from where baby Jesus lay asleep in the hay.

the program when Mary walked onstage, wearing a bedsheet tied around her head. And Joseph, with a bathrobe he borrowed that was too long, walked beside her.

Keep from smiling, I reminded myself. For heaven's sake, keep from

giggling. This is serious business, no matter that Jim Kolka looked dumb as Jesus, worse than dumb.

Mary and Joseph knelt by the sawbuck filled with straw that contained the baby Jesus, some girl's naked doll.

Don't even smirk. Nothing funny here. Not unless Jim trips on his bathrobe.

Mrs. Jenks took her place at the big brown upright piano that stood against the wall. To play the instrument, she had her back to the stage and to the front row made up of students. For a moment a great silence came over the room. Not a whisper from anyone in the audience. Respect for the nativity scene. Then Mrs. Jenks began to play "Away in the Manager" and a trio of our best vocalists began singing the words, "Away in the manager, no crib for his bed."

A touching scene. Done with feeling. Performed with reverence. And then it happened. We all knew that

mice had, earlier in the fall, built a nest in the piano, but we thought we had trapped all of them. Obviously not. A shy little field mouse, awakened by the clatter of piano hammers pounding against wire, stuck his head out the top of the piano, a place that Mrs. Jenks could not see.

"The little Lord Jesus lay down his sweet head," the choir continued.

I saw the mouse first and poked Dave, who was sitting next to me. He immediately burst out laughing. I could see the back of Jenks' neck turn red. The mouse crawled down the piano, then paraded across the stage, stopping dead center, only a few feet from where baby Jesus lay asleep in the hay. All the kids in the front row were giggling. Mrs. Jenks' neck grew redder. Then folks in the back of the room saw the mouse and began laughing. Mrs. Jenks, furious by now, wheeled around, ready to chastise everyone in the schoolroom. Then she saw the mouse and a slow smile spread across her face.

A school board member with a broom encouraged the mouse off the stage, and out the schoolhouse door. Mary readjusted her sheet. Joseph tightened the rope around his waist, and Mrs. Jenks took her place on the piano bench. Not a smile was seen, not even a smirk. ■

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