



hermit thrush, photo courtesy of John Lore

## Eat Like a Bird

Here are some interesting misconceptions about feeding birds.

Maybe you've been filling your birdfeeder lately. You know, so the squirrels can display their backyard acrobatics as you attempt to foil their pilfering the seed you intended for the birds. Possibly you have elaborate ways to thwart their efforts, like high mounted guards, or baffles that close when the squirrel imposes its weight on the perches. Some folks opt for a high-priced joyride that spins the rodents until they can hold on no longer. This seems to result in all manner of videos online. I'm

not sure if this comedy ride is cruel, but the laughter that ensues surely seems sadistic ( just saying).

When you open up your birdfeeder in the fall and the neon lights that say “Diner Open” blink in the woods, visitors begin to show up. The obvious cast of players that you intended the seed for—finches, chickadees, juncos, turkeys etc.—arrive to be fed. But there is also another group of hungry diners; first on the scene are the squirrels, and then there’s the evening crowd—opossums, flying squirrels, skunks, raccoons, and who knows what else.

But before you invest in equipment, permit me to share that most birds prefer to eat on the ground. The elevated feeder is normally an effort to foil the unintended guests, and we know how well that works. Sometimes we simply wish to get a better view of the avian visitors. After all, feeding birds is mostly for our enjoyment, but although on the earth’s floor the proper camouflage makes your viewing more difficult, it makes their survival more likely. You may wish to consider feeding the birds where they prefer by scattering food on the ground to begin with. Often you will see larger birds just go crazy brushing the nuts and seeds off the feeder, as though they know what’s a

better location. It is also a good idea to rotate the feeding spot, no matter what style you prefer, so that the area is cleaner.

You should provide cover for birds to drop in very close to the birdfeeder. Some folks have suggested placing a former Christmas tree or a stick pile near the base of the feeder. When you feed birds you often feed hawks as well, Cooper's and sharp-shinned hawks in particular. The cover helps to level the playing field a bit for the smaller ones.

I have pretty much given up feeding birds with feeders, with the exception of hummingbirds.

I rely on the large number of native flora varieties that we have planted to sustain the birds in a more natural way. This means letting your garden stand through the winter, especially where there are seedheads. Marital bliss is an issue at my home in this instance. My husband, Mister Tidy Yard, can't wait until I give him the green light in the spring to bring out the power tools—aka weed whackers—to cut down the standing dead soft mast. It took me years to get him to wait, wait, wait until spring, and once given the chance he gets an indescribable look in his eye. I

wouldn't go as far as to evoke the Chainsaw Massacre, but let's just say it's borderline evil. He knows that ideally I should deny him this moment and let them stand and succumb on their own, but keeping men from their power tools is a task for a woman with far more fortitude than I. Maybe this year.

On National Public Radio's Saturday morning Living on Earth series, a favorite of mine, Mary McCann, offered some great facts about birds' appetites. Evidently, the intended meaning of, "eat like a bird," is way off base. Mary offered that medium-sized birds eat about 12 percent of their body weight each day. She further suggested that for a 150-pound person, that would be 18 pounds, equivalent to say six extra-large pizzas! And the smaller the bird the larger the appetite. Chickadees eat 35 percent and hummingbirds drink 100 percent of their body weight daily. Needless to say, if you try to eat like a bird you have likely already seriously diverged from that reckless New Year's Eve resolution.

I'm not going to say feeders be damned because so many people do get such great pleasure from observing their avian visitors. But I would say that a native

garden would ultimately attract and feed your visitors in a friendlier and healthier fashion year-round. Still, I will also offer this: Birdfeeders have taught many young children to adore wildlife. And some of those youngsters inevitably grow up to have occupations that are linked to the natural world. So feeders do have their place!