

Our garden birds and how they get through the winter unharmed

When winter sets in, it is high time to “assist” our feathered garden residents who stay with us during the cold season. But what’s the best way to do that? Does it make sense to feed birds and if so, what do you need to consider? And are there other ways to help the birds in winter? We have answers to all these questions.



the name great tit refers to the "coal-black" parts of the head



the house sparrow - also called just sparrow - is one of the most well-known and widespread songbirds.

When the classic "chillp chillp" sounds, usually intoned by a whole troop, because the birds are extremely sociable, everybody knows who is singing. House sparrows, commonly known just as sparrows, are omnipresent, unmistakable and indispensable winter guests in our local gardens. But they are not the only ones who stay with us during the cold season. Greenfinches, which at first glance look quite similar to sparrows, but have yellow-olive feathers, also defy Father Frost. The delicate sparrows save energy by lowering their body

temperature and only start the day at sunrise, which puts them among the late risers in the bird world. The tomtits also have to be mentioned. Great tomtits with their sulphur yellow breast and black bonnet are the most common representatives in the winter garden, closely followed by the smallest domestic tomtits, the blue tomtits, which impressively prettify the winter with their blue-yellow feathering. Nuthatches exercise headfirst along tree trunks, singing blackbirds warble their songs, croaking jays join in cacophonously, striking male chaffinches stay at home in contrast to many female chaffinches, who are drawn to the south, and with a little bit of luck even a goldfinch, one of the most colourful representatives of the native bird world, with its red face, black and white head and partly yellow wings, adorns the winter garden. In total, Austria has more than 150 species of birds, which remain in our country all year round, even in winter, as so-called resident birds. As wild animals, they can of course care of themselves. Nevertheless, the frosty season is a challenge for all wild animals, winged and wingless. However, growing asphalt surfaces, overly "tidy" gardens and intensive agriculture with its winterly bare fields hardly offer an abundant source of food. This can be countered. But if you want to reach help of birds in winter, you should know how. The basic rule for feeding must therefore be: If you feed them, feed them properly!



the feathering of the male blackbird is monochromatic black, the beak strikingly light yellow to orange.



the bold black and white speckled feather bonnet makes the Crested Tit unmistakable.

The right time to start feeding

As long as no vegetation sprouts, the landscape is covered with snow and the birds have not yet started to breed, it means thumbs up for bird feeding. At low temperatures, blue tit, nuthatch and co. need much more energy to maintain their body temperature. Once you start feeding, it is best to feed continuously throughout the winter. That way, the birds always have a reliable source of food to fall back on and do not have to search for available food in the event of severe frost. In spring, it is important to let the feeding fade out slowly, because especially in the case of late onsets of winter until April, feeding places gain another important function, especially for returning migratory birds. Spread over the rest of the year, however, it does not make sense to feed free-living birds, because the natural food supply is sufficient.



feeding must be regular, hygienic and of high quality to be really useful.

Bird Feeding 101

The "when" of the bird-feeding 101 has now been clarified, leaving still the "where", "how" and "what", to be also clarified. Because even in doing so - unknowingly - some things can be done wrong. It is best to set up bird feeding places near bushes and hedges, free-standing and preferably out of reach of domestic cats. That way, birds can approach the feeding place from a safe cover. Some bird species, such as blackbirds, chaffinches and robins, prefer to feed on the ground, so ground feeders are also suitable for them, but only if cats do not patrol the garden regularly.

Feeding silos - the new birdhouses

Hygiene at the feeding place is the be-all and end-all of bird feeding. Many winter birds have a high energy metabolism, i.e. they feed and at the same time repeatedly defecate. If this gets into the food, it contaminates the feeding place and enables the transmission of diseases. Rain and snow are equally problematic. Wet bird food becomes mouldy and also supports the spreading of germs. Instead of feeding the animals, it can make them sick. In the classic open birdhouses, as we all know them, the food is exposed to the weather; the birds sit in their buffet and use it simultaneously and fatally as a lavatory. In order to keep the food dry and free of excrement, it is necessary to rethink. Instead of traditional bird houses, feeding silos, columns and automatic feeders should be introduced into winter gardens. They may not sound particularly tempting, but they fulfil all the basic requirements of the bird feeding 101. With the silos, columns and automatic feeders, only the birds' beaks come into contact with the food. If you do not yet want to litter of your old bird house, you can of course continue to use it, but for the birds' sake you should make the effort to clean the house daily with hot water and dispose of the old food that has not been eaten yet.

The right food

The question remains as to the right choice of food. Basically, the more different the food on offer is, the more birds are attracted by the choice. If you offer a variety of seeds, fat food, berries and nuts, you can accommodate and observe on average up to 20 different bird species in your own garden. In principle, soft food eaters, granivores and omnivores can be distinguished from each other like the cawing jays. On one hand, blackbirds, thrushes and robins, with their preference for apples, raisins or fat-soaked cereal flakes, are among the soft food lovers. On the other hand beech and greenfinch, goldfinch, bullfinch or hawfinch, keep it firm to the bite. As grain eaters, they prefer sunflower seeds, peanut kernels and oily seeds such as poppy or hemp. House sparrows, tree sparrows or yellowhammers also like it pithy, but prefer small seeds and peeled

sunflower seeds. And among tomtits, nuthatches and woodpeckers, solid fat food, such as the classic tomtit dumplings, is very popular in addition to sunflower seeds and nuts. Kitchen waste, however, is not for birds! And, also for our feathered friends: quality is important. So it is better to buy food from a specialist shop than from a cheap discount store.

A colourful garden

In a particularly severe winter, however, even supplementary feeding cannot work wonders. Single individuals can be saved, but it is not enough for entire populations. It is therefore even more important, to create a rich habitat for the animals from the outset than providing food. A near-natural garden with many wild shrubs makes more sense in the long term than a temporary feeding place. What should such a garden be like? Hedges with berries that can be harvested by the birds over the winter should form the basis. These include rosehip and hawthorn bushes, elderberry, rowan, cranberry, snowball, parson's cap, privet, barberry or dogwood, a colourful potpourri of berries, which many birds like to snack on. If you also leave sunflowers and thistles, plant hazelnut bushes and let a copper beech thrive, you will provide the seed and nut lovers among the birds with all kinds of delicacies. In this way the garden remains a busy place full of life even in winter!

Make your own tomtit dumplings

Tomtit dumplings provide energy-rich fat food and can also easily be produced by yourself. Carefully heat animal fat (beef tallow from butchers) or vegetable fat (coconut fat) until the grain mixture can be incorporated. Whichever fat you choose, it is important that it hardens well. If the fat is too soft, it could contaminate the bird feathers. Sunflower seeds and hemp seeds, which are particularly rich in oil, are suitable as a food mix. Oat flakes, chopped nuts (unsalted peanuts, walnuts, hazelnuts) and smaller seeds such as millet, poppy seed or flax supplement the mixture. A dash of cooking oil ensures that the fat does not become too hard and crumbles.



the hawfinch feeds mainly on seeds from deciduous trees and fruits.



in winter, the robin often feeds on bird houses.



the upper side of the body is blue-grey and the bottom is white to ochre or rust-red, depending on the subspecies.



Der Stieglitz, auch Distelfink genannt, ist eine Vogelart aus der Familie der Finken.

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