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2002

Now That Cold Weather Is Approaching, Do You Have Tips For Keeping Bird Feeders Safe?

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Recommended Citation

Messmer, Terry, "Now That Cold Weather Is Approaching, Do You Have Tips For Keeping Bird Feeders Safe?" (2002). *All Archived Publications.* Paper 403.
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ask A Specialist

A weekly question/answer column

Now That Cold Weather Is Approaching, Do You Have Tips For Keeping Bird Feeders Safe?

Terry Messmer answers:*

Feeding birds throughout the winter is both a humanitarian act and a way to bring birdwatching to your own back yard in the cold months. However, a poorly maintained bird feeding station may cause some real problems for the birds you are trying to help.

According to the National Wildlife Health Center there are five diseases that affect birds that visit bird feeders. The diseases are salmonellosis, aspergillosis, avian pox, trichomonias and mycopalmosis. All of these diseases can lead to death either directly or indirectly by making the bird more vulnerable to predators.

Here are some preventative measures that will make for healthier birds and lessen the chance of spreading diseases from your bird feeder.

- **Give them space** — Avoid crowding at bird feeders by providing ample feeders.
- **Clean up wastes** — Keep the feeder area clean of waste food and droppings. A broom and shovel will work, but a wet and dry vacuum is great.
- **Make feeders physically safe** — Use feeders with rounded corners. Feeders with sharp edges may cut birds, thus allowing bacteria an opening to infect otherwise healthy birds.
- **Keep feeders clean** — Clean and disinfect feeders regularly. Use one part of liquid chlorine bleach in nine parts of warm water. Make enough solution to immerse empty feeders completely for two or three minutes. Allow the feeder to air dry. This should be done at least once a month.
- **Use quality food** — Discard food that smells musty, is wet, looks old or has fungus growing on it. Clean and disinfect any storage containers or scoops that were used to store the feed to fill the feeders.
- **Prevent contamination** — Keep rodents and pets out of stored food. Rodents can carry and spread some bird diseases without being affected themselves.
- **Spread the word** — Tell your bird-feeding neighbors and friends about the risks. Since birds may use several feeders in a neighborhood, your feeder may not be safe until your neighbors' feeder is safe.

Follow these precautions and you and your birds will continue to enjoy your bird-feeding efforts.

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* Terry Messmer is Utah State University Extension Wildlife Specialist