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Baltimore Oriole and Rose-breasted Grosbeak. Photo: Melissa Groo

Ethics

When It's Okay (or Not) to Feed Birds

Providing food—for photography or simple enjoyment—can be a thorny issue. For guidance, ask yourself these three questions.

By Melissa Groo

May 24, 2018



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Birds in This Story



Florida Scrub-Jay

*Aphelocoma
coerulescens*



Snowy Owl

Bubo scandiacus

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Whether we identify as birders or photographers or both, we are always looking for ways to get closer to birds, or to bring them closer to us. Offering food—sating the hunger that is such a primal drive for all of us—is an easy way to do that. But knowing what kind of food is okay to supply, and when, and where, can be confusing. Over and over, in nature-photography forums and on social media, I see the following

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questions: “Isn’t all bird feeding harmful?” and “What’s the difference between [feeding birds at a feeder and feeding owls](#)?” and “How can you be okay with handfeeding Gray Jays and opposed to feeding owls?”

These are false equivalences that, in the end, only hurt birds. To paint every species with one broad brush is to ignore or deny the varying needs and circumstances of every kind of bird and the realities of its particular life—realities that depend on population status, habitat, physiology, and the unique challenges it faces. There is no one-size-fits-all approach.

So how do we make sense of it all?

The Three Questions

When I was younger, a mentor of mine gave me this advice: Before speaking, ask yourself the following three questions: Is it true? Is it kind? Is it necessary? I sometimes fall down on the job, but I aspire to follow these as best I can. When thinking through this issue, it occurred to me that, similarly, three questions could be applied to any bird-feeding situation. And that the answers could help guide decisions in a way that is best for both birds and people.

1. Is this species at risk?

Information on the status of a species is just a click away. Good sources include state and federal listings, the [IUCN Red List](#), and Audubon’s [Guide to North American Birds](#). Using these, we can easily discover how a species is doing in our states, provinces, countries, or worldwide. We may even find that the status of a species varies greatly from one place to another.

If a bird is classified as “threatened,” “endangered,” or “of special concern,” that means it is struggling to survive. We must exercise extreme caution when making decisions that might affect that bird. Even if we have the best intentions, what we think might benefit a bird might actually cause unintended negative consequences.

A case in point: Florida Scrub-Jays. If you were to do a simple google search like “scrub-jay status Florida,” you would quickly find that this species is listed as vulnerable to extinction by the IUCN and as federally threatened. Fewer than 5,000 Florida Scrub-Jays remain. Their numbers have dropped by 90 percent over the past century, as the scrub and scrubby flatwoods they require have been fragmented and destroyed by development and agriculture.



Florida Scrub-Jay. Photo: Melissa Groo

Bird lovers quickly realized that Florida Scrub-Jays will come readily to the hand for peanuts. Unfortunately, studies have shown that jays fed by humans reproduce earlier in the year than those that are not. As a result, their fledglings hatch before the caterpillars they rely on for nutrition are available, leading to malnourishment and starvation. People also feed jays near roads, and collision with vehicles is a major cause of their death. Thus, it's now illegal to feed Florida Scrub-Jays unless you have a permit from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

Snowy Owls are also in precipitous decline. Although there are a number of reasons why offering food, such as pet-store mice, to owls [can be harmful](#), certainly the fact that this species is vulnerable to extinction, per the IUCN, makes feeding them particularly irresponsible and ill-advised.

In short, birds that have special population status due to their declining numbers should not be fed (unless, say, you're a researcher working with appropriate permits). This advice is in line with the American Birding Association's [Code of Ethics](#).

2. Is the food appropriate and safely provided?

The most common place we offer food to birds is, of course, in our own backyards. Fortunately, there is a wealth of information on how to safely set up and maintain bird feeders. [Providing feeders](#) means taking on a responsibility, as in addition to food they can present a whole host of risks, including the spread of viruses and parasites, a greater chance of window strikes, and increased vulnerability to cats and raptors. But if best practices have been followed, research shows that feeders may actually help birds to survive and reproduce.

Of course, the healthiest, most natural food you can offer to attract birds to your yard are native trees and shrubs, such as serviceberry or crabapples, which are a longstanding food source for them. Plant species native to each part of the country can easily be looked up in Audubon's [native plants database](#).

One of the least healthy foods is also one of the most popular, especially in parks with resident waterfowl. Bread has little nutritional value and may cause an unhealthy condition referred to as “angel wing.” Opt instead for cracked corn or oats—in moderation, of course. Leftovers from overfeeding can contaminate water, spread diseases, and attract rodents.

3) Is feeding this bird likely to change its behavior in harmful ways?

Ask yourself: Might feeding this bird cause it to associate food with a particular place? Does it draw the bird closer to roads, for example, where it could be struck by a car? Feeding owls by the side of the road presents an obvious danger: Collisions with vehicles are a leading cause of death for owls, since they fly low over the ground and relatively slowly at times.



Snowy Owl. Photo: Melissa Groo

Feeding a bird might also lead it to trust people. Could that habituation eventually put it in danger? Does the bird migrate to a region where it's not well understood, or where it's hunted? The answer will be different for a bird of prey (possibly yes) than for a songbird at a feeder or for a chickadee hand-fed sunflower seeds in a preserve (probably no).

On the flip side, you should also ask whether feeding a bird might cause it to aggressively seek handouts from people. We've all seen gulls at the beach or swans in a park grab food out of someone's hand. Once these birds begin to associate people with easy food, they can become bold and pesky. This both creates a hassle for people and poses a danger to the birds, as they gain a bad reputation and eventually may be harmed. Local ordinances and regulations may not permit feeding expressly because of these issues. There are also laws regarding feeding that govern our national park system, where it's illegal to feed any wildlife.

You don't have to be a bird expert or conservationist to realize that birds today face a multitude of challenges. When thinking of offering food to birds, as nature photographers, birders, or nature lovers, each one of us can take a little time to do some research and to sensibly weigh

the pros and cons of our choices. We can make informed decisions, and hopefully balance our desire to get the shot with what's best for the birds.

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