

BACKYARD BIRD HAVEN

The September Field Guide

Birdseed, habitat & the art of paying attention



NORTHEAST + MID-ATLANTIC • SEPTEMBER 2026

By Elizabeth Carpenter

A NOTE FROM ELIZ

Begin with the view you have.

A flower head. A flicker of movement.
A bird you almost missed. This is
where Backyard Bird Haven begins:
in the small details that make an
ordinary place worth watching.

My roots in coastal Maine and my life in Falls Church
shape this guide. I want it to be useful at a kitchen
window, in a shared courtyard, or beside a garden
you are still figuring out.



Start with one question. Which seed suits the birds I see? Can I make my feeder easier to
clean? What is already growing here? Use the answers to choose one manageable next step.

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Numbers beside factual claims open their sources. Research papers and practical Cornell Lab references are distinguished on pages 10-11. Activities are invitations to observe, not promises of wildlife outcomes.

BIRDSEED SECRETS

Match the food to the feeder.

Use this as a starting point. Keep a record of what birds actually eat in your space.

FOOD	WHY CHOOSE IT	SERVE IT IN
Black oil sunflower	A versatile starting seed. Thin shells and oil-rich kernels. [4]	Tube, hopper or tray. [4]
Striped sunflower	Thicker shells than black oil sunflower. [4]	Hopper or tray. [4]
Nyjer	Tiny seed eaten by American Goldfinches and Pine Siskins; not native thistle seed. [4]	Small-port tube or fine mesh. [5]
White proso millet	Favored by many ground-feeding sparrows, doves, towhees and juncos. [4]	Low tray with good drainage. [4]
Peanuts	Used by jays, chickadees, titmice and woodpeckers. Keep dry; discard spoiled food. [4]	Match feeder openings to the food. [5]
Safflower	A cardinal option, but not a dependable squirrel deterrent. [4]	Tray or hopper. [4]

BUY A SMALL BAG FIRST

Our suggestion: try one food, note what gets eaten, and adjust the amount before buying in bulk. Bird visits are never guaranteed.

CARE COMES FIRST

A good setup is easy to care for.

01 / Choose access, drainage and a good fit.

A hopper serves many seed-eating birds; an open tray offers visibility but exposes food to weather and droppings. Tubes vary in perch size and port design. Choose a feeder you can take apart and clean. [5]

02 / Put cleaning on the calendar.

Cornell recommends cleaning seed feeders about every two weeks, and more often in wet weather or heavy use. Remove debris, clean according to its instructions, rinse thoroughly and let the feeder dry before refilling. Clear discarded food and hulls below it. [6]

03 / Keep water shallow and fresh.

Choose a basin with a gentle slope: no more than 1 inch deep at the edge and 2 inches in the center. Change water every day or two. Where cats roam, leave open ground between the bath and dense shrubs so birds can see approaching predators. [7]

WHY THE ROUTINE MATTERS

A peer-reviewed review of British wildlife disease surveillance explains how feeding sites can bring birds into contact with pathogens. Good care belongs in the plan from the beginning. [2]

Before buying: Can I reach every surface? Can I empty old food? Who handles care while I am away?

BUILD THE HABITAT

Think beyond the seed bag.

A planting decision can begin with one identified plant and a few good questions.

In a Washington-area study, yards dominated by nonnative plants had fewer suitable arthropods and poorer population outcomes for Carolina chickadees. Plant origin mattered to this insect-eating bird’s food supply. [1]

The study gives a strong reason to consider native vegetation. It does not mean every native species fits every yard, or that a single purchase guarantees more birds. [1]

LOOK AT THE SITE

Record sun and shade, soil moisture, space, existing roots, and how much care you can provide. Add the mature size of any plant you are considering.

ASK AT THE NURSERY

What is the botanical name? Is it native here? Does it suit this soil and light? What will it look like at full size? What care will it need?

ONE EXISTING PLANT TO IDENTIFY

ONE PLACE THAT COULD USE A BETTER PLAN

MY QUESTION FOR A LOCAL PLANT SPECIALIST

SEPTEMBER NOTEBOOK

Two places. A closer look.

Regional observation prompts for September 2026, not a forecast of birds at your address.

NORTHEAST / COASTAL MAINE

Harpswell • Quahog Bay • Casco Bay

Choose one familiar view and return to it this month. Note the time, weather, flowering plants, remaining seed heads, and any birds you can identify. On an evening walk, record which exterior lights stay on after they are needed.

The science behind that last question: a study of New York City's Tribute in Light found disrupted nocturnal migration behavior, which ceased when the lights went off. Reducing unnecessary lighting at home is a precautionary application, not a measured result for a Maine porch. [3]

MID-ATLANTIC / DC, MARYLAND & VIRGINIA

Falls Church • Silver Spring • Annapolis

Start a plant inventory before your next nursery visit. Use the Washington-area chickadee study on page 5 to guide your questions. Then watch the birds themselves: what are they eating, where do they pause, and what do you still need to identify?

A seasonal detail worth noticing

American Goldfinches are not always bright yellow. Nonbreeding birds are drabber, with dark wings and pale wingbars; immatures have their own buffy tones. Compare shape and markings as well as color. [9]

SPECIES FOCUS

Make room for cardinals.

Northern Cardinal / *Cardinalis cardinalis*

Food is only part of the picture.

Northern Cardinals eat seeds and fruit as well as insects; nestlings receive mostly insects. Black oil sunflower is among the seeds they use. They occupy shrubby edges and dense vegetation, and build cup-shaped nests in plants. [8]

A practical starting point

Try a tray or hopper that offers comfortable footing. Choose food using the reference on page 3, and plan the cleaning routine before setting up. Preserve useful vegetation while you assess the space. [5] [8]

A notebook prompt

If a cardinal visits, write down where it lands, how it approaches, and what it eats. Describe the behavior you saw rather than deciding what it must mean.

FROM BACKYARD BIRD HAVEN

The Cardinal Attraction Kit

In development. Follow along for the final contents, availability and Etsy launch. This guide is free and complete on its own; no purchase is required.

YOUR FIRST 30 DAYS

One change you can keep.

Begin whenever you download this guide. The schedule supports a habit, not a promised arrival date.

01

Days 1-10 / Learn your view

Pick a comfortable observation point. Make three short visits. Record birds, plants, weather and unanswered questions. A visit with no birds still belongs in the notebook.

02

Days 11-20 / Solve one problem

Choose a practical task: clean an existing feeder, review a water setup, or identify a plant. If shopping, check dimensions and care requirements before choosing equipment.

03

Days 21-30 / Make one decision

Act on what you learned. Plan a suitable planting, adjust a care routine, or switch off an unnecessary light. Return to your observation point and record what changes.

MY ONE ACTION + A DATE TO REVISIT IT

TIME, BUDGET OR HELP I WILL NEED

PRINTABLE OBSERVATION PAGE

Describe it before you explain it.

Use this page more than once. These are personal field notes, not a standardized survey.

DATE / TIME / DURATION

TOWN / OBSERVATION POINT / WEATHER

WHAT I SAW OR HEARD

IDENTIFICATION / CERTAIN, TENTATIVE OR UNKNOWN

WHAT THE BIRD WAS DOING

NEXT TIME, I WANT TO LOOK FOR...

WORKS CITED / RESEARCH

Follow the evidence.

The scientific foundation, with the scope of each study kept visible.

[1] Narango, D. L., Tallamy, D. W., & Marra, P. P. (2018). Nonnative plants reduce population growth of an insectivorous bird. *PNAS*, 115(45), 11549-11554.

<https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1809259115>

Residential landscapes near Washington, DC; Carolina chickadees. Supports the habitat discussion, not a guarantee for every species or yard.

[2] Lawson, B., et al. (2018). Health hazards to wild birds and risk factors associated with anthropogenic food provisioning. *Philosophical Transactions B*, 373, 20170091.

<https://doi.org/10.1098/rstb.2017.0091>

Review drawing on Great Britain wildlife disease surveillance. Supports feeding-site hygiene concerns; it does not measure risk at your feeder.

[3] Van Doren, B. M., et al. (2017). High-intensity urban light installation dramatically alters nocturnal bird migration. *PNAS*, 114(42), 11175-11180.

<https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1708574114>

New York City's high-intensity Tribute in Light. Supports the lighting discussion, with residential application identified as an inference.

These papers are peer reviewed. The next page contains expert practical references, which are a different kind of source. No cited study tests this guide or the Cardinal Attraction Kit.

WORKS CITED / PRACTICAL REFERENCES

Keep learning. Keep looking.

Click a numbered title to open the source. References reviewed September 17, 2026.

[4] Cornell Lab of Ornithology. Feeding Birds: a Quick Guide to Seed Types. All About Birds.

[5] Cornell Lab of Ornithology. How to Choose the Right Kind of Bird Feeder. Updated August 22, 2024.

[6] Cornell Lab of Ornithology. How to Clean Your Bird Feeder. August 20, 2024.

[7] Cornell Lab of Ornithology. Attract Birds With Birdbaths. All About Birds.

[8] Cornell Lab of Ornithology. Northern Cardinal: Life History. All About Birds.

[9] Cornell Lab of Ornithology. American Goldfinch: Identification. All About Birds.

ABOUT THIS EDITION

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