

## **Bird Feeders – Which Is the Best One to Buy?**

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Recent studies have shown that watching wildlife ranks second only to gardening as the a leisure time activity in the United States. Watching birds at feeders is the most popular way individuals enjoy wildlife in the United States. A U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service study showed that “More than 50 million Americans feed wild song birds” each year. Feeding birds is an activity that brings action, color and song right into your backyard. Bird feeding Americans spend over \$2,733,200,000 ( that’s \$2.7 B-I-L-L-I-O-N) on bird feed and over \$830 million on bird feeders, birdhouses and nest boxes. With this much money being spent on bird feed and feeders each year there should be little wonder why there are literally hundreds of feeders, houses, and boxes on the market to choose from. In this first backyard wildlife article I’m going to focus only on feeders. Future articles will cover the best feed to use and which houses or boxes to buy or build.

How do you pick which feeder is right for you? Many people pick a feeder based simply on looks. There is nothing wrong with this approach but often the cutest, best looking feeder is not the right feeder for you. It may be of a design which does not attract the types of birds you want to see at your feeder. Or, it may not be designed to stand up to the rigors of the wild-life in your backyard.

Two of the biggest bird feeding complaints that I get involve undesirable bird feeder guests. The first goes like this “larger birds like pigeons and blackbirds have taken over my feeder and won’t let the smaller birds like chickadees and tufted titmice feed.” The second big complaint involves that little gray bandit, the squirrel. Not only do squirrels chase away your birds but many times they will gnaw your beautiful expensive bird feeder into a pile of shavings. This problem is easy to fix by first, choosing the right feeder to match the kind of birds you want to see at your feeder, and second, finding one that is “squirrel-proof” (actually “squirrel-resistant” is a better term).

In this article I will discuss the merits of 3 different styles of feeders that in my experience seem to be the best at keeping larger birds at bay, repel most squirrel attacks, and hold up for years in harsh weather conditions.

### **Tube Type Feeders**

The tube feeder is one of my favorites. A tube feeder is, as the name implies, a tube which has openings in the side allowing birds to get to the feed inside. Tube feeders come in many different sizes from 6 to 60 inches long and all are about 3 inches in diameter. In general the longer tube feeders have more feeding holes and perches than shorter ones. The size of the bird that can feed at a given tube feeder is limited by the perch size (length) and the distance from the perch to the feed access hole. Most tube

feeders have several perches arranged at two to four levels around the tube. The length of the perch determines what size bird can sit on it. Most tube feeders have perched about 2 inches long. This size perch is just right for chickadees, titmice, cardinals, finches, and warblers but too short for bigger birds like pigeons or blackbirds. When larger birds like bluejays, blackbirds, dove, or pigeons try to perch they find that the perch is too short for them to get both feet on or if they do get situated on the perch it is impossible for them to get their head around to the access hole to feed. Much of the choice of which type tube feeder you buy is personal preference, however, I do strongly urge you to choose a tube feeder with the following two characteristics: first, adequate armor plating and second, enough storage capacity to keep you from having to fill it up too often.

First, and most important buy one that squirrels cannot chew up. This is actually true for any bird feeder you buy whether it is a tube feeder or other style. Squirrels will come to your feeder to get your bird feed but often these ungrateful rodents are not as satisfied with the design of your feeder as you and the birds are. Squirrels tend to gnaw any part of your feeder they don't like into a design that better suits them. I can say without exception that I have never liked feeder design changes by gray squirrels as well as the original design. Most often they gnaw feeding ports and other parts of your feeder to allow them access to the feed storage area.

I have seen many ingenious ways folks have used in attempts to defeat squirrels but few work out over the long run. For now, it is enough to say that I have found the only way to protect your tube feeder from destruction by gnawing squirrels is to get one that is armor plated.

There are two designs available today that meet the bill. One is made entirely of metal and the other is made of plastic but has metal protecting the top, bottom, and all feeding ports. The all metal design is great but is limited by size. A big one is very heavy and hard to handle. The big plastic tube ones are lighter and can hold more feed. Another advantage the plastic ones have over the metal ones, is that you can see the level of the feed from top to bottom. The metal ones only have a couple of viewing ports to allow you to see the feed level.

Feed storage capacity of your tube feeder is the final consideration in choosing the right feeder for your situation. The size of feeder you need depends on how many birds you have coming to your feeder. A 1 foot long tube feeder with 4 perches is big enough if you have only 10 or 12 regulars. I never seem to be lucky enough to attract only a few



birds but always seem to attract massive hoards of birds. If I tried to feed using a small tube feeder I would spend all day reloading it. I have started using a 5 foot long tube feeder with 8 perches. I can usually get away with filling it about every other day during the fall and winter.

There are two cardinal rules of bird feeding etiquette which should not be violated. They are: first, once you start feeding birds in the fall you should not stop until after spring migration and second, if you're going to feed birds then you should provide enough feed for all comers (i.e. don't let your feeder run out of food).

The reason for these "feeding rules" actually has a biological basis. Birds migrant to warmer areas in the winter to get away from the cold but also to find more available food. If you stock a feeder during the fall migration you will "short stop" the migration of many birds because they assume that the feed supply at your feeder is endless and that they need not travel any farther south to survive. In addition birds generally to go only as far south as absolutely necessary to survive the winter. This is because they want to be as close to their summer breeding grounds as possible so they can "beat the crowd" to the choicest northern breeding sites in the spring return migration.

Regardless of which tube feeder you choose to buy, be sure to clean it about every 2 to 3 weeks. Use a mild solution of bleach water, then rinse and dry it before putting it back out. Feeders naturally congregate birds and disease can spread easily. Periodic cleaning can help prevent many problems.

#### Weighted Perch Type Feeder

Besides the metal protected tube feeders, one of the best feeder design going is one which employs a sliding or swinging door which closes when a large bird or squirrel tries to feed. My personal favorite is one named the "Absolute Bird Feeder." This feeder has a perch on the front which is attached on both sides to an adjustable weight running along the back. When a light bird or several light birds light on the perch the feed access ports by the perch stay open and allow the small birds to feed. However, when a bigger bird or squirrel sits on the perch the perch drops down and a metal door slides across the feeding ports preventing access to the feed. The weight is adjustable and allows settings from very light to very heavy closure depending on your particular situation.

With the exception of the wooden perch, the "Absolute Feeder" is all metal construction. The one I have had for over 10 years bears the marks of many a squirrel attempted break in. The only squirrel damage sustained by the feeder is some missing paint. Rumor has it that there are many a frustrated grey squirrel with sore front teeth wherever the *Absolute Feeder* is used.

The only thing that has worn out in the 10 years that I have owned mine is the

wooden perch. There have been so many birds to land on the perch, take out and peck open a sunflower seed that my perch wore in two a year ago. It was easily fixed with a new length of half inch hardwood dowel and a screw in each end.

The Absolute holds about 5 pounds of sunflower seed so doesn't have to be refilled too often even if you have a lot of birds. It can be purchased to be hung from a bracket or limb or pole mounted.

#### Wire Enclosure Type Feeder



The final all around "big bird/squirrel proof feeder" that I can vouch for is what I call the "wire enclosure" feeder. These come in several designs but the main principle is the same for most of this type. The feed is surrounded by some type of heavy wire mesh with openings about 1.5 by 1.5 inches which allows small birds to enter and feed but keeps bigger birds and squirrels out and away from food. This type of feeder works great but be sure it is equipped with a metal top and bottom as well as the metal wire mesh. If there is any plastic on the top, bottom, or in the wire mesh a determined squirrel will break in with little trouble in as little as 30 minutes.

In Summary.

The feeders discussed and recommended above are all excellent and all employ the same basic principle of limited access to feed and heavy duty metal construction. There will be new bird feeder models out every year and you can evaluate new designs very easily by just making sure they employ these basic principles of limited access and metal construction. The necessity for these design elements will not change and if you buy a feeder which lacks either you will be feeding big birds and squirrels and in all probability have a feeder which is gnawed to pieces as well.

#### References

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