

# Winter Bird Yard

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## Winter Survival - Chickadee Style

During the winter, temperatures at night can plunge to dangerous lows. How do the birds survive? As the mercury drops with the setting sun, chickadees find a sheltered place (preferably a tree cavity) and huddle together. By “clumping” the birds share body heat – just like putting your cold feet on a toasty bedmate!

As effective as clumping can be, chickadees need to take extra

steps to survive winter nights. Chickadees rely primarily on fat stores they have accumulated from the day’s feeding to carry them through the frigid nights. Their bodies are too small to pack on any more insulation and energy! To conserve as much fat as possible, chickadees enter a mini-hibernation called torpor. During this time, they allow their body temperatures to drop about ten degrees, and slow their metabolisms accordingly. Even with these drastic measures, the

little birds consume almost 70% of their fat reserves! If they did not become torpid, they would starve to death before morning.

As a result, chickadees wake up early and hungry! They are among the first birds to start foraging in the morning. They will also feed in conditions so foul that other birds opt not to leave their roosts. If they did not, the chickadees would not live through the following night. Now that’s winter survival!

## Roosting Boxes

To conserve even more energy than torpor alone, birds will often “clump” together (this is an actual scientific term) to share body heat. A whole bunch will share a night roost, be it in a tree cavity or on the branch of an evergreen tree to better their chances of surviving till daybreak. To help our brave winter birds, why not install a roosting box?

Roosting boxes are different from nest boxes in a variety of ways. Instead of an empty box, it has dowelling to provide roosting perches for the clumping birds. The entrance is located at the bottom of the box to keep precious heat from escaping. Some of the more posh models even have insulation to better maintain a toasty temperature inside.

Hang the roosting box in a sheltered area, away from the wind, and if possible, in a sunny place for maximum warmth. These winter lodgings will be especially popular as breakfast will be ready nearby!

## Build It and They Will Come!

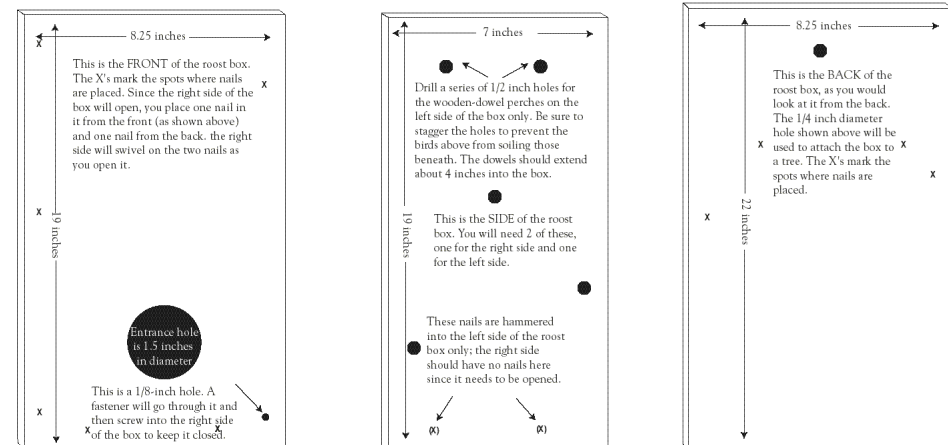
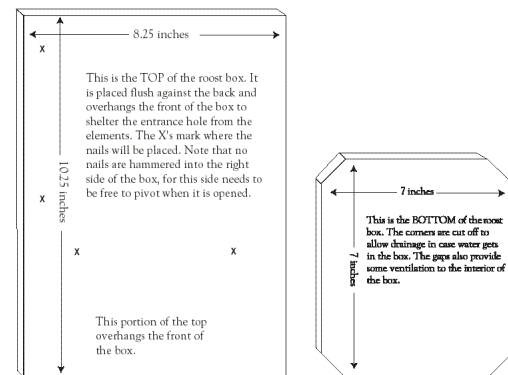
Try your hand at building this super easy roost box, and guaranteed you’ll enjoy a flurry of grateful visitors all winter long.

## Instructions

All you need is a saw, drill, hammer, some nails, 1/2” dowelling, hardware cloth and of course some wood, common pine works well for this project.

1. Draw the patterns on the wood for the top, bottom, front, back, and sides of the roost box.
2. Mark where nails, entrance hole and dowels go.
3. Cut out the wood.
4. Drill holes.
5. Staple 1 1/2” mesh, 5” x 19” piece of hardware cloth on back panel. (This is to accommodate hairy woodpeckers and downies, who roost upright, clinging to the wire.)

6. Drive nails partially into wood where indicated.
7. Install dowels along left side of roost box.
8. Place pieces together and finish nailing.



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It is always a little sad when the last skeins of geese finally pick up and head south. They seem to herald the inevitability of autumn’s final crisp breaths. Have you ever noticed the white smiley-faces on their tails? Are they mocking us with their smug tail feathers?

For some, winter conjures images of bleak, frozen landscapes, devoid of life and joy. Nothing could be further from the truth! While many animals do avoid the cold season, a hardy bunch brave the snow and windchill, including a diversity of bird species. By adding a variety of birdfeeders and natural plantings to your yard, your whole family can enjoy their songs and antics all winter.



## Who’s Coming To Dinner?

To get started, figure out what kind of birds live in your area. The type of plant cover in your neighbourhood will determine what species you can attract.

Chickadees, nuthatches (the “upside down bird”), pine siskins, woodpeckers, grosbeaks and blue jays are likely residents of older neighbourhoods with mature trees like Charleswood, Wolseley, and St. Boniface.

More recent communities like Whyte Ridge and Eaglemere may

be home to house sparrows and juncos.

Once you know what species are common in your vicinity, you can target those birds by providing the food and feeder style they prefer.

## Location, Location, Location

Before you even choose a feeder, take a look at your yard through the eyes of a bird – where would you be most comfortable eating? Out of predators’ reach is a good start! Here are a few other points to consider when choosing a feeder location:

1. Good visibility from your house – once you’ve attracted them, enjoy them.
2. Cover close by – a place for birds to hide or to take their lunch to eat
3. Shelter from the wind – have you ever been to a picnic on a windy day... during the winter?
4. Ease of filling and maintaining the feeder – this need not be a wilderness adventure!

## Feeder Frenzy

At this point, personal taste and budget will probably dictate what kind of winter bird feeder you will choose for your yard.

A table feeder is a great starter style. A flat surface with raised edges and gaps for drainage, tables can also be outfitted with hooks for hanging treats like peanut strings and suet bags. Table feeders can be attached like a shelf to your home, just outside your favourite window, providing a close-up view of your feathered friends.

Large-capacity hopper feeders are great for winter! These house or gazebo-shaped feeders can be used year-round and filled with a variety of seeds. You fill these feeders at

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the top - the birds will empty them from the bottom!

Tube feeders are long, easy-to-fill cylinders of seed. Birds access the treasure within from perches near access holes. There are two types of tube feeders - distinguishable by their holes. Thistle feeders have small openings - the size of a grain of rice. The tweezer-like beaks of pine siskins and redpolls can pull the seeds out. Wild bird seed feeders have larger openings, about the size of a quarter, and can be filled with mixed seed, striped sunflower seeds or black oil sunflower seeds.

## Let Them Eat Suet Cake

Suet is any type of animal fat. Rendered and mixed with seeds, nut and fruits, it provides concentrated food energy for winter birds. Suet is best reserved for winter feeding when warm weather won't turn the fat rancid.

You can purchase ready-made cakes or make your own. Suet is usually sold (sometimes it's free) from a butcher shop or from the meat department of your grocery store.

Making your own suet cakes is good messy fun. By adding a variety of tasty ingredients - along with a binder such as peanut butter or cornmeal - to melted fat, you can easily whip up a whole season's worth of suet treats.



## It's for the Birds!

### Peanutty Raisin and Oat Cakes

This recipe from "Feed the Birds" by Helen and Dick Witty sounds good enough for people to snack on (except the rendered fat part...)! Resist the temptation and serve it to the birds.

2 cups rendered suet

2 cups raisins, currants or chopped, dried prunes

2 cups rolled oats, any kind

1 cup cornmeal

1 cup peanut butter, any kind

Melt the fat in a saucepan. Combine raisins and oats in a food processor until coarsely chopped. Mix in cornmeal, suet and peanut butter. Mold into cupcakes or loaves, or pack into clean, empty tuna cans. Wrap and chill for up to 2 months.

To serve: Hang cupcakes or chunks in an onion bag or suet cage. Cans can be tacked directly to a post.

## No Sweets for the Tweets

Crumbling dried bread crusts as an offering to songbirds seems like a good way to reduce food waste. A special sweet treat of cake or cookie crumbs sounds good, too. Unfortunately, these tasty tidbits do more harm to our feathered friends than good.

The high sugar content of most commercially produced breads increases the heart rate of birds. This creates undue stress at a time when birds are either preparing for migration or adapting to colder temperatures. You have probably seen what the sugar content of cakes and cookies do to your 4-year-old nephew or niece. Translate that to the tiny body and faster metabolism of a bird!

Homemade bread isn't much better. Yeast irritates the avian digestive system. Perhaps the worst part is that bread contains almost no nutrients. Compound all these problems with the fact that bread expands in the stomach with moisture, and you have a bird that feels full, but is basically unfed. Save your treats and save the birds.



## A Sip of Snow

Your birdfeeder is fully stocked with seeds; suet balls hang temptingly in the branches of the dormant crab apple; salt and sand have been set out for those with dull, rounded gizzard grit - the table is set. But what shall your fine, feathered friends drink? The answer lies all about you.

Winter birds are adapted to deal with the winter water shortage. They eat snow to wet their whistles.

## True Grit

To make your yard even more attractive to songbirds in your neighbourhood, try offering these special services.

Many birds, especially seed eaters like chickadees, nuthatches, blue jays and sparrows need grit for their gizzards to grind food. "Harder to find than hen's teeth" is no old wives' tale - birds do not have teeth. They swallow their food whole. The food - say a millet seed - descends to the gizzard, a type of small stomach, where it is "chewed". Chewing is accomplished through the contractions of powerful muscles and the grit stored in the gizzard. Birds probably don't have teeth because they need to be as light as possible to fly.

Sand or poultry grit may be added directly to seed or offered separately. Offering grit is especially important after a heavy snowfall when streets and roads are covered.

Some bird species like pine grosbeaks and crossbills actively seek out salt. Offer a pan of coarse salt mixed with grit or soil to attract these beautiful winter residents. Careful not to place salt over precious flower beds or other planted areas. The salt will kill the vegetation!

## The Squirrel Factor

Squirrels can be enthusiastic patrons of bird feeders. So enthusiastic that you may find your feeder mangled and empty. To nip any squirrel problem in the bud, plan to use any or all of the following tactics to discourage those furry bandits from raiding your feeder:

**Access denied:** Start by placing your birdfeeder out of squirrel reach. Feeders should be placed at least 2 m (7 feet) from a possible horizontal launching pad, and at least 1.5 m (5 feet) off the ground (remember to allow for winter snow pack). There are also "squirrel-proof" feeders, but remember, squirrels never turn down a challenge!

**Baffle them:** Baffles are broad plastic or metal cones that squirrels cannot climb around. Whether placed over a hanging feeder or under a post feeder, they are formidable obstacles to unwanted dinner guests.



**Treat them:** Try distracting squirrels with a food source of their own. Spread peanuts and seeds on the ground. Install squirrel feeders such as corn cob holders away from your bird feeder.

There are also "squirrel repellents" on the market. Made from very hot peppers, it is added directly to feed. Birds don't mind it, but mammals find it uncomfortably spicy. Try outwitting them first (you can do it, I promise) before you resort to chemical warfare!

## Winter Bird Feeding Guide

- Prefers this food
- Accepts this food

	Cracked Corn	Millet	Niger Seed	Peanuts	Black Sunflower Seed	Striped Sunflower Seed	Suet, Fat	Berries, Apples, Other Fruit	Salt
Black-capped Chickadee			○	○	●	●	○		
Pine Siskin		●							○
Pine Grosbeak					●	●			○
Evening Grosbeak					●	●			○
Blue Jay	○			●	○	●	○		
Dark-eyed Junco		○			●	●	○	●	
Downy/Hairy Woodpecker				●	○	○	●	○	
House Sparrow	○	●			○	○			
Nuthatches				○	●	●	●		
Redpoll		○	●		●	●	○		
European Starling		○			●	●			

## The Menu

Most feeders will readily dispense just about any kind of seed. What seed you choose will probably be the determining factor in making your feeder the neighbourhood hot spot - or not.