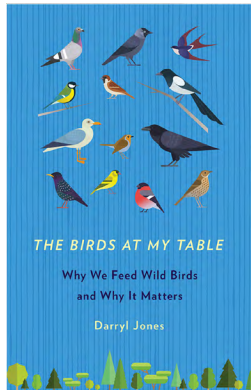


The Birds at My Table: Why We Feed Wild Birds and Why It Matters

By Darryl Jones. 2018. Cornwell University Press, Comstock Publishing Associates. 352 pages, 19.95 USD, Paper.

The central purpose of *The Birds at My Table* is aptly explained by the subtitle *Why We Feed Wild Birds and Why It Matters*.

While it may at first seem unlikely that Canadian naturalists would be interested in a book on bird feeding written by a behavioural ecologist from Australia, the author delivers an exceptional overview of both the science and art of



intentional bird feeding throughout the world. It is not at all a how-to book on feeding birds, but rather an exploration of the human, avian, and economic dimensions of what was once a simple backyard process engaged in by people around the world but is now a global industry. The author takes a common, almost universal human-wildlife interaction that many may never have thought about deeply, and highlights its major implications, both positive and negative, for wildlife ecology. The book explores many aspects of bird feeding that I never really contemplated, despite having fed birds for almost my entire lifetime. Many dimensions of bird feeding are delved into, from the early history of bird feeding and the huge growth in the bird feeding industry, the debate over whether to feed just in the winter or year-round, the effects of supplementary feeding on bird populations, human perspectives on and reasons for bird feeding, the role of bird feeding in disease transmission,

the valuable role of citizen science in monitoring bird populations, and supplementary feeding as a species recovery and conservation measure.

The author makes it clear that he was not an expert on the science of feeding birds when he first initiated his research. He is refreshingly candid and open about what his expectations were and what findings surprised him, and engagingly and understandably conveys those lessons to the reader. The informative and eloquent style kept even the Acknowledgement section interesting and engrossing.

The history and diverse facets of bird feeding around the globe are informatively presented. To many, bird feeding is a common phenomenon of little ecological or social importance. But it is now virtually a global phenomenon, and it is easy to forget that the first mass marketing of wild bird seed and feeders only began in the 1960s. The scale of bird feeding is astonishing, and the author presents interesting and sometimes staggering statistics without resorting to dry facts. For example, in the United States alone 20 000 railway cars-full of black sunflower seed are sold annually, globally over one million tons of seed are sold annually worth \$5–6 billion, in New Zealand over 5 million loaves of bread are fed to birds annually, fully one-half of the population in many countries feeds birds, and in the United Kingdom enough bird seed is sold annually to support many times the populations of birds being fed.

The book provides an interesting summary of the history and evolution of bird feeding, from the casual sharing of available food scraps with neighbourhood birds to the deliberate, year-round feeding of birds using manufactured feeding devices and food grown spe-

cifically for the bird feeding market. The metamorphosis of black sunflower seed in just a few decades from a native plant cultivated by indigenous peoples of North America and consumed naturally by relatively few bird species to the primary seed fed to and consumed by birds globally was a fascinating story. Interesting parallels are drawn between the growing environmental consciousness in the early 1900s, the conservation movement and the establishment of the first USA national parks, and a growing public interest in bird feeding that led to a rapidly expanding demand for wild bird feeding and feeding products.

A truly international picture of bird feeding today is presented. The anecdotes and references are taken from many countries, and the author interviewed experts from many countries in the course of his research. There are many Australian, New Zealand, and European references, and from a North American perspective it is interesting to learn about the similarities and differences of bird feeding habits and perspectives elsewhere in the world. It was enlightening to learn that bird conservation agencies around the world hold very different and sometimes completely contradictory perspectives on major questions, such as whether to feed birds only in winter, year-round, or not at all.

The book is thoroughly researched and solidly referenced, although there has been surprisingly little research until recent decades. While noting the limited availability of scientific information, he has compiled a diverse array of both current and historical resource materials from the scientific literature, bird food supply companies, bird conservation agencies, and others. The available scientific literature has been thoroughly gleaned and summarized. Without compromising the integrity of individual studies, Jones presents complex and complicated results in a way that the lay audience can understand. This is not easy, as many studies come to different or even contradictory conclusions. Without sparing readers from the challenges of inadequate research, differing techniques, differing species ecology, and inconsistent results, he familiarizes them with the challenges of scientific investigation and interpretation of results. He succinctly provides general conclusions and observations on bird feeding, while still recognizing the complexity and diversity of results, and notes when his conclusions or suppositions are hypothetical or based upon subjective evaluation. References are presented by both chronological footnotes by chapter as well as an alphabetical listing by author. Unfortunately, this method is clear but cumbersome and somewhat inefficient, requiring double the effort to find a reference; sometimes the same reference is cited several consecutive times, but there is no way to know this until the chapter summary is consulted.

Areas where scientific research and documentation are limited are clearly identified. The author saves his greatest incredulity for the lack of research, and his most overt indication of humour for the “virtually uni-

versal pastime of ‘feeding the ducks down at the lake,’ a practice that leads to untold tons of bread being tossed to waterfowl the world over” (p. xiii). But the humour is ironic, however, for Jones goes on to note the dual result: “bringing joy to millions and often resulting in the eutrophication of urban lakes and a host of attendant ecological problems” (p. xiii). He returns to this topic later in the book, so clearly he is very interested in, and perturbed by, the amount of bread fed to waterfowl and frustrated over the lack of research on the implications of this practice.

The book is well written and edited. It was a bit surprising that there was only one passing reference to the potential implications of extensive supplemental feeding for natural selection, given the dramatic effects on bird survival and populations; I assumed that this topic would have featured much more prominently. It was also surprising that, although there were references to many types of food and birds around the world, the supplementary feeding of nectar-feeding birds such as hummingbirds was not mentioned. There was one minor misrepresentation of biological fact that can be forgiven in a Southern Hemisphere author: Black-capped Chickadees are referenced as being at the northern limit of their range in Wisconsin, when in reality they occur almost as far north as the treeline.

Many unique and interesting aspects of avian ecology and conservation are mentioned throughout the text. This includes information on species such as the Monk Parakeet, an aggressive invasive in the eastern USA that is sustained in winter only through the use of feeders, Noisy Mynas in Australia that are attracted by the planting of native nectar-bearing shrubs and then exclude most other species through their aggressive territorial behaviour, and the role of supplementary feeding in the recovery of species at risk such as Red Kite (United Kingdom) and Takahē (New Zealand).

The chapter on disease transmission was a fascinating and sobering summary of the known and potential role of feeders in the dissemination of avian diseases, through both viral transmission where birds congregate and tainted foods such as peanuts with aflatoxins.

This book will be of interest to both naturalist and scientific audiences interested in the art and science of feeding birds. North American readers will get a refreshing and interesting global perspective on bird feeding. Readers will find that the answers to the basic question, *Why We Feed Wild Birds and Why It Matters*, are both simple and complex, and they will find much to ponder in this book. Those who feed birds will come away with a renewed understanding and awareness of the role of supplementary feeding in the ecology of birds, and will look at feeding birds in a new and broader way.

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