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Bird watching during the winter has become a major spectator sport for people of all ages and abilities. Long winters here create an opportunity to provide food and water to songbirds that might be in scarce supply.

Retail centers, garden centers, and hardware stores provide a variety of bird feeders, bird food supplies, and water heaters for consumers to consider and purchase for their yards in the hope of attracting songbirds to eat and drink outside of their windows. In return, feeding birds can provide hours of enjoyment and interest.

A wide variety of magazines and Extension publications from across the United States are available for feeding birds. While reading and enjoying this material, the key is to consider recommendations that match the local climate and birds that are in the area for the winter.

Here are some basic items to consider when planning for and feeding songbirds for the winter.

• Which songbirds are in the area for the winter? Try keeping a list of the songbirds that are noticed. This will help indicate which type of feed to purchase and where to place the feeder.

• Where do these birds potentially reside in your yard, neighborhood, or area? Place feeders and water supplies where the birds will find them. Location of feeders depends on the specific bird. Generally, a location in close proximity to trees, branches, shrubs, or other potential perching locations is helpful.

• Select a feeder that is well suited for the birds that arrive in the yard. There is a wide variety to choose from locally or through online shopping. Selecting the best suited feeder will help increase the chances of birds actually eating out of the feeder.

• Choose feed for the birds that you know are in the area for winter. Feed may also be chosen and correctly placed to try to attract birds of specific interest that may not readily visit the yard, but could if food was available. Feed will vary in content, and which birds it will attract. Doing the homework ahead could save money on wasted or uneaten feed.

• What about the squirrels? They seem to find ways to get into feeders, and scare away desired birds when they eat. If squirrels are a problem, consider setting up a separate feeder in the yard for the squirrels to eat out of. Feeders using ears of corn are very popular. Choosing bird feeders that make it difficult for squirrels to feed in may be an option as well.

Providing a consistent source of thawed water will help attract birds as well. Water heaters can be purchased to place in birdbaths or other containers to help keep the water supply thawed and available for the birds to drink out of. Use water containers that will withstand the winter cold, and are the correct volume for the heater’s ability to thaw the water.

Please read and follow all water heater instructions when using them outside. Provide a consistent source of electricity for the heaters so they can continue to heat and keep the water thawed.

The extension office has a wide variety of publications on feeding songbirds. These publications contain specific material for specific bird species on feeder type, preferred feed, and where to place the feeder for maximum use.

If you have any questions about feeding songbirds in the winter, please contact me by sending an e-mail message to david.lott@unl.edu, or by contacting your local University of Nebraska-Lincoln Extension Office.