



# Wild Bird Division

## BIRD BATH Information, References & Tips



# BIRD NOTES: PROVIDING WATER FOR BIRDS

Like all animals, birds need water to survive. Though they can extract some moisture from their food, most birds drink water every day. Birds also use water for bathing, to clean their feathers and remove parasites. After splashing around in a bath for a few minutes, a bird usually perches in a sunny spot and fluffs its feathers out to dry. Then it carefully preens each feather, adding a protective coating of oil secreted by a gland at the base of its tail. For these reasons, a dependable supply of fresh, clean water is attractive to most birds. In fact, a birdbath will even bring to your yard birds that don't eat seeds and wouldn't visit your feeders. Providing water for birds can also improve the quality of your backyard bird habitat and should provide you with a fantastic opportunity to observe bird behavior.

## What's Wrong with a Good Old-Fashioned Birdbath?

Say "birdbath," and most people think of a concrete basin mounted on pedestal, the kind often sold in lawn and garden shops. Though these baths make nice lawn ornaments, they aren't the best setup for most birds. For one thing, they're often too deep. A good bird bath mimics shallow puddles, which are nature's birdbaths. Concrete baths are also hard to clean; the tiny nooks and crevices must be scrubbed extra hard to dislodge algae and sediment. And finally, concrete basins often crack if they freeze during winter.

## Find a Better Birdbath

When you're choosing a birdbath, look for one with a basin that you can clean easily. It should also have a gentle slope to allow birds to wade into the water. You can make your own bath out of garbage can lid, a saucer-type snow sled, or even an old frying pan. But if you'd rather buy one, look for a birdbath made of tough plastic that won't break if the water freezes or if your dog knocks it over.

For the ultimate birdbath, set up a permanent pool in your backyard. Just dig a shallow hole in the ground and line it with plastic or cement to make watertight. Plant ferns and other native plants around the pool to make it more attractive. You can add a pump to circulate the water if you want to create elaborate multilevel pools.

## Setting Up a Birdbath

Try to imitate a natural puddle as much as possible when you're installing your birdbath. Birds seem to prefer baths that are at ground level, but if you are concerned about cats, raise the bath two or three feet off the ground.

And don't forget to put it where you'll have a good view of the birds.

It's a good idea to put some sand in the bottom of the bath, to give the birds sure footing. If the bath is on the ground, arrange a few branches or stones so that when they emerge from the water, the birds can stand on them and drink without getting wet (this is especially important in the winter).

Placing your birdbath in the shade, near trees or shrubs if possible. A shady location slows evaporation and keeps the water fresh longer.

Furthermore, birds can't fly well when they're wet, so they're vulnerable to predators when they're bathing.



Kozy Deck  
Mountain Bird Bath  
API  
#064777



Kozy Heated Bird  
Bath w/ pedestal  
API  
#064779



Water Wiggler  
API  
#003854

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Without cover nearby, they'll feel safe because they can escape quickly. If their splashing is interrupted by a cat or a hawk, they'll be more likely to venture into the water.

One of the best ways to make your birdbath more attractive is to provide some motion on the water's surface. Water dripping into the basin catches the attention of birds. You can buy one of the commercially available products that drips or sprays water into a birdbath. Or recycle an old bucket or plastic container by punching a tiny hole in the bottom, filling it with water, and hanging it above the birdbath so that the water drips slowly down.

## Keeping Water Moving & Preventing Freezing

Birds are attracted to moving water. Moving water will many times attract birds even without food in the area. Keeping water moving will keep it fresher longer and help in preventing the spread of West Nile Virus. Immersion-style water heaters have improved greatly in the last few years, and they're perfect for keeping the water from freezing in a birdbath. More important, they're safe to operate. The latest immersion heaters on a ground-fault the bath dries up. Put your heater on a ground-fault interrupted circuit (available from any hardware or electrical supply store) to eliminate the danger of electrical shock. These heaters cost pennies a day to operate and they're available at most places where bird feeders are sold.

A homemade solution is to put a light bulb in a flower pot and place the water basin on top. The light bulb will provide more than enough heat to keep the water from freezing.

Though some people advocate adding glycerin to a birdbath to act as an antifreeze, we do not recommend it. You must use a high concentration of glycerin to prevent water from freezing. (To lower the freezing point to 15 degrees F, for example, you'd need to use a 30 percent glycerin solution.)

Glycerin is a low-level toxin and has a sweet taste. Ingesting large amounts of glycerin elevates the blood sugar level of a bird, which can be harmful or even fatal. And if a bird bathes in a glycerin solution, its feathers may become matted. Birds bathe and preen to enhance the insulation value of their feathers. Matted feathers are poor insulators, leaving a bird susceptible to cold temperatures. So use an immersion heater instead.

## Maintaining a Birdbath

The key to attracting a large number of birds is to keep your bath full of water at all times. In the natural environment, most sources of shallow water are intermittent. Although puddles form after a hard rain, reliable pools are rare and birds will travel great distances to visit them. Keep your birdbath full and you'll be well rewarded. But remember to clean your birdbath every couple of days. Don't let the water become stale; clean off the bottom of the bath immediately if green algae starts to form.

Remember: if you're trying to make your back yard a better place for bird-life, few things are more attractive than a well-maintained birdbath. Just add water and watch the fun.

*Bird Notes from Sapsucker Woods, Number 0 Cat. No 219*



Heated Bird Bath  
Basin  
API, #003848,  
stand #003852



Heated Rock  
De-Icer  
**Farm In-  
novators**  
#003901

# *Facts about the West Nile Virus*

West Nile Virus is a mosquito-borne virus. Infected mosquitoes transmit the virus to birds through a bite, and the birds then become carriers of the disease. Some of these birds will survive, while others will die from the infection. While crows and jays are the species that seem to have the highest mortality rates, all birds are susceptible. An infected bird can transmit the virus to an uninfected mosquito, which can then infect another bird, creating a vicious cycle of transmission.

Infected mosquitoes can, and do, transmit the virus to people, but the hysteria surrounding this fact is usually much greater than the actual risk of human infection. The vast majority of people bitten by infected mosquitoes never exhibits any symptoms and suffers no ill effects of the virus. The actual chance of a human becoming ill from West Nile Virus is less than 1%, not high odds by any standard.

Some people are at higher risk than others, among them the elderly and those with compromised immune systems. While it was originally thought that small children were at greater risk than adults, research has proven that this is not so; people who are least 50 years of age and older are more likely to become infected.

No matter how small the odds of infection, those who do become ill from the disease and don't receive medical treatment can die, so caution should prevail.

Mosquitoes lay their eggs in standing water, and the larvae need 2 to 3 days to hatch. If the surface of the water is disturbed, the mosquitoes won't hatch into mature adults. As far as bird baths being breeding grounds for mosquitoes, one simply has to do the math: replace the water in your bird bath every two days during their breeding season, and no mosquitoes will have the opportunity to reproduce.

Keeping the water in bird baths fresh and clean should be a requirement of anyone who provides water for the birds, since bacteria that can harm the birds grows in dirty water. If that alone is not reason enough for you to do so, you really shouldn't have a bird bath. The fact that water left unattended for three days can harm humans through the possibility of spreading WNV should be added incentive for everyone.

Water features like drippers, misters, and recirculation fountains and pumps create moving water. Not only do these features attract more birds with the sound of moving water, they also provide the valuable service of keeping the water surface disturbed, thereby eliminating the possibility for mosquitoes to reproduce.

Mosquitoes are a lot more likely to use other sources of water on your property than your bird baths, since one big, fat robin will do a bang-up job of disturbing the surface of the water with a bath! So take a look around your property for other areas where they can breed: gutters, buckets, wheelbarrows, toys, tires, and anything else that can hold water. Keep in mind that a mosquito can use a relatively small amount of water, such as that contained in an empty soda can, to hatch 200 to 300 every other day.

Tend to your birdbaths and continue to use the same precautions you always have – avoid being outside at dusk and dawn when they are most active, and use repellents applied to skin and clothing – along with these added ones, and you'll be able to provide water for your bird without any added concern.