

Feeding Birds *Without* Feeding Birds *to Cats!*

**A *Bird Feeding Strategy*
that Deters Stalking
Cats, Marauding
Raccoons, and Messy
Opossums**

We have an “outdoor” cat with comfortable indoor accommodations in our garage, and other cats occasionally visit our suburban yard. Yet, we love having birds around our small oasis of shrubs and trees. I take particular pride in the Northern Cardinals that come to feed and drink year round, and sometimes arrive in astronomical numbers in hard times during frigid winter periods.

On one occasion twenty-five years ago when our home was adjacent to hundreds of acres of pasture and unused land that was erupting in modest-sized cedars, my wife Carol, daughter Kimberly and I partitioned the yard for simultaneous counts and we tallied 118 Cardinals, then 138 in the second count. Maybe we could have claimed some measure of fleeting fame with a Guinness Book listing?



All those cedars in a savannah-like landscape provided extensive nesting habitat, and we were generous with black oil sunflower seeds in multiple feeders and in thickets on the ground. The landscape has since changed to a housing development, with a forest of large cedars crowded into a closed canopy beyond. But we still have twenty or more Cardinals at prime times just prior to evening light. Our then-five-year-old granddaughter Olympia, visiting for Thanksgiving a year ago, said, "Grandpa, I think you have all the Card-in-als in Man-hat-tan." They are accompanied throughout the day by a few Black-capped Chickadees, Dark-eyed Juncos and a Tufted Titmouse or two as winter regulars.

Although it is not easy to train cats whether they are pets or feral, one can deter them from capturing birds at a feeder. Domestic cats still have a natural instinct to hunt birds, mice or whatever moves (except dogs). I tried and gave up. I haven't seen our cat, Hazel, with a bird and seldom found sufficient evidence to convict her of the charge. Still she would sometimes crouch in a hunting posture partially concealed among rocks near the feeders. That, combined with the fact that a steady stream of Raccoons and Opossums seemed to keep coming at night to feed on sunflower seeds in the platform feeder, drove me – not crazy – but to try something new.

African pastoralists and cattle herders have a solution to co-existence with big cats long ago. Maasai herdsmen made corrals with barriers of thorn branches to keep cattle safely in at night and African Lions out. City covenants probably prohibit a "enkang barrier" around our residential yards, but a wreath of Honey Locust branches embedded in and around the feeders themselves are ideal for the challenge presented by cats and coons.

Other branches can be used to make loose brush piles, or "thickets," and can serve as a vital component of any considerate bird-feeding operation. Unless there is a protective thicket where songbirds can flee when frightened or threatened, they are often sitting ducks for Cooper's or Sharp-shinned Hawks.



Without a reasonably close thicket birds are less likely to come to the feeders, and I think they are more likely to fly into windows when they panic. We have some reasonably good shrubbery and a perfectly overgrown Forsythia, but at 35 feet it is a bit too far from the best feeder. Thus, the thorn thicket encompassing the base of the feeder is needed. Cardinals and Juncos freeze in place without any need to flee.

Once the thorny branches were in place our cat has not persisted in

crouching near the feeders in preparation for an ambush. Likewise, Raccoons and Opossums have not climbed up to feast in the pan on the platform and haven't knocked down the hanging feeders. Mission accomplished.

Now, I simply invite others to bring clippers, meet me in our Pottawatomie County pasture and take away a pickup load of Honey Locust branches as if they were evergreen boughs for holiday decorating. But wear welder's gloves and don't drop 'em in the driveway.



Many
Cats are Great Pets.

Others are
Killers of Birds.

Birds are certainly better off when domestic cats stay indoors and are not allowed to stray freely to hunt and kill birds and other wildlife. A recent study by scientists with the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute and Fish and Wildlife Service estimated that cats kill **1.4 to 3.7 billion birds every year—in just the U.S.** Feline predators include both domestic cats that are outdoors and stray cats that are free ranging in cities and rural areas. Most cats seek to kill if they can.

Cats are often beneficial where they help control destructive rodents within farmsteads and human habitations, but when there are dozens they decimate other wildlife in the area. Their predation is not selective for House Sparrows, a non-native often-detrimental species. Two-thirds of the bird kills include Cardinals, Wrens and other native songbirds. Long-distance migrants including Indigo Buntings, Yellow Warblers and Dark-eyed Juncos fall prey.

Birds are most vulnerable when they nest on or near the ground, when young are fledging, and when birds are attracted to feed or water exposed to stealth attacks. Inclement weather can magnify the risk when feed and water stations are the only source available.

Feral and other free-ranging cats take the greatest toll on native birds, small mammals and reptiles. Un-owned and other outdoor cats caused about 70 percent of bird mortality, and 90 percent of the carnage of small mammals (including shrews, chipmunks and young rabbits). Worldwide numbers of feral and free roaming cats are staggering.

"No matter how much the cats fight, there always seem to be plenty of kittens." —Abraham Lincoln

Deterring Squirrels Completely Requires Additional Technology

Our Fox Squirrels are reluctant to tangle with Honey Locust thorns. I've only seen one occasionally climb over to the closest feeder from close-hanging honeysuckle branches, and then if startled it leaps to the ground and heads for the nearest tree without any scrambling through the thorn structure.

However, if hauling in and handling thorns isn't your idea of a good time, and your feeders are next to squirrel springboards, additional technology is needed. That is where a skilled guy, who has a shop and collects iron of various kinds from farm machinery and old wells, can come to the rescue. The design is simple. It requires a ten-foot length of old well rod to form a shepherd's hook, and three extra foot-long pieces to form spikes to be welded at the base to drive into the ground and firmly secure the structure. A large metal washer is welded over it about three feet from ground level, and an old disc blade is placed loose over the upper section.



Most squirrels, Raccoons and Opossums cannot readily climb up the rod and get past the "floppy disc." The feeder is hanging from the hook four feet above the unstable disc. We had Darrold Schoeder of Newport, Nebraska make a couple for the Niobrara Sanctuary guesthouses so feeders didn't have to be refilled so often. That way Goldfinches and other birds could rely on a dependable source of sunflower seeds to supplement (but not replace) other natural foods.

A lady recently told me that she simply gave up bird feeding last spring, primarily because of the cost of feeding too many squirrels. Although squirrels are also appealing, the joy of backyard bird feeding and associated birding can be made more affordable if some of these crafty critters can be kept on a natural diet of acorns, walnuts and tree buds.



Squirrels are a delight. They deserve some, but not all of the sunflower seeds. Mark Twain wrote insightfully about cats. Had he fed birds he'd have left volumes about the cleverness of squirrels.

Bringing in Neotropical Migrants in Spring with Water and Habitat

A variety of trees with an understory of shrubs extending into the lower limbs, with foliage from the upper canopy down to the ground, combined with a good source of water below, are sometimes magnets for spring migrants. Early May of 2013 brought a colorful display of neotropical passerines to our yard. The list included an Indigo Bunting male that stayed around for days, a Spotted Towhee and a male Summer Tanager. Our son, Ryan, was visiting and he commented that he had never seen a Painted Bunting and hoped to add it to the list. Later that afternoon he called to say, "guess what," a male Painted Bunting had just appeared next to the feeder.

For the first time, I seriously courted the attention of Baltimore Orioles with oranges cut in half. I impaled them on thorns and the metal ends of the shepherd's hooks holding feeders. A colorful ice cream dish was also filled with grape jelly. The reward was a number of Baltimore Orioles and one Orchard Oriole.

Prior to their arrival, a Northern Waterthrush, two Winter Wrens and an Eastern Phoebe visited the minnow pond near the feeders. At various other times in late winter and early spring Yellow-rumped Warblers came in for refreshing drinks, joining American Robins, Cedar Waxwings, Cardinals and a Yellow-shafted Flicker. Other notables in the branches and along the trunks of the larger trees include Red-breasted Nuthatches, White-breasted Nuthatches, and one or two Brown Creepers. I seldom see Brown Creepers except during blizzard-like conditions. They creep up the trunk of a Cottonwood tree and are

almost indistinguishable from the rough bark.

Dead trees and snags are particularly attractive for some birds. Folks who trim every limb off of trees within reach and mow everything underneath as in city parks don't do it for the accommodation of birds. I've often thought that dead and dying trees and limbs are more valuable as bird habitat than the average living tree—although both are important. I've allowed a couple dead pine

trees to stand in place and had a dead cottonwood in the yard for a while. Downy Woodpeckers nested and raised young in the cavities they created, and they introduced the fledglings to the suet that came from one of our grass-fed steers.

Leafless branches make choice singing perches for Cardinals, and they are the preferred perches for Mourning Doves.

Although some branches may fall during a storm, if they aren't over the house, the street, a powerline or one's car, it is usually not a problem. Fallen limbs can be used to make a loose brush pile in a secluded corner of the yard, next to shrubbery. A brush pile adds to the ground habitat needed by Carolina Wrens and contributes to their prospect of finding meals of attached insect eggs! Carolina Wrens, in turn, add to the delight of those of us who enjoy their calls and songs in every season.'

-- Article and photos by **Ron Klataske**



A Bird-Friendly Yard, Farm or Ranch is a More Joyous Place

Birds featured in the photos include Northern Cardinals, a male Goldfinch, a pair of House Finches, Dark-eyed Juncos two male Baltimore Orioles, and a Carolina Wren singing in secure shrubbery.

NATURE IS A FRAME OF REFERENCE FOR QUALITY OF LIFE

"Some birds are not meant to be caged, that's all. Their feathers are too bright, their songs too sweet and wild. So you let them go...." —Stephen King, *Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption: A Story from Different Seasons*