Birds can keep 4-H’ers interested in the outdoors through the winter

Source: Laurie Thomas, extension forester and Ashley Osborne, 4-H youth development specialist

Young people can enjoy their natural environment, despite the weather getting cooler. Watching and feeding birds is a great way for youth and their families to continue to enjoy the outdoors and learn more about their backyards. Kentucky is a winter home to a diverse group of birds including cardinals, sparrows, finches, juncos and chickadees that are sure to grab the attention of young people with their wide range of colors and sounds.

While we enjoy watching them and listening to their songs, birds provide many benefits to our backyards. They help with flower pollination and provide a natural form of pest control as they eat many insects like spiders, worms and snails.

To attract more birds to your backyard, you can make a bird feeder and provide food for them during the winter, when other food sources are scarce. This a great activity for adults and youth to do together. Laurie Thomas, University of Kentucky extension forester, has made a video to walk you through the steps to make a bird feeder. It is available online at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cBwg27LPJU4](https://nam04.safelinks.protection.outlook.com/?url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.youtube.com%2Fwatch%3Fv%3DcBwg27LPJU4&data=04%7C01%7Ckatie.pratt%40uky.edu%7C6a40fef30aad481ec00e08d885029f8c%7C2b30530b69b64457b818481cb53d42ae%7C0%7C0%7C637405593599723732%7CUnknown%7CTWFpbGZsb3d8eyJWIjoiMC4wLjAwMDAiLCJQIjoiV2luMzIiLCJBTiI6Ik1haWwiLCJXVCI6Mn0%3D%7C1000&sdata=%2F%2BYwbd13%2BOioEgQ03DEBvhcLkaMgHY3T4M4hBdyuJ%2Bw%3D&reserved=0).

Bird feeders are inexpensive to make. You can make them using many common objects found around your house and yard. The materials you need are an empty and clean gallon jug, magic markers, scissors, a small utility or paring knife, at least 12 inches of string, a small washer and two straight sticks or dowels. Since sharp objects are needed for this activity, adult supervision and permission is required.

Using the small knife, start by making at least five small openings in the bottom of the jug to serve as drain holes. This allows rainwater to escape the feeder. Your sticks or dowel rods will serve as a perch for the bird. With a marker, make spots for where the sticks will go through both sides of the jug. This will ensure the spots line up, and your sticks go through both sides without any problem. Next, take your marker and draw two to three rectangles directly above the perch for the food opening. When you have placed your opening and perches, have an adult use the small knife to cut the opening for the perches. Use scissors to cut the opening to give the birds access to the feed. Insert your two sticks into the jug, making sure the two sticks intersect each other.

To make a hanger for the feeder, use the small knife to create a hole in the jug’s cap. Run the washer through your string and tie it around the string to secure it. Pull the string through the cap until the washer hits. Now that you have the bird feeder ready, decorate it anyway you like using markers.

Bird seed is really the only thing you will probably need to purchase for this project. Seed mixes that contain mostly black oil sunflower seeds are the healthiest for Kentucky’s common birds.

Now that you have a bird feeder, you can start learning how to identify your common backyard birds by going to Cornell University’s Project Feeder Watch at https://feederwatch.org/. The site has printable picture identifications of common backyard birds based on region. You can keep those printouts next to your window to help your family easily determine who is visiting your feeder. Keep a record of the visiting birds using Kentucky 4-H’s bird record sheet. It is available online at <https://4-h.ca.uky.edu/sites/4-h.ca.uky.edu/files/bird_record_sheet.pdf> or by contacting your local extension office. If you or your young person become really interested in birds and want to take your involvement a step further, you can become citizen scientists by reporting your bird counts to Project Feeder Watch. There is a small cost to participate.

For more information on winter outdoor activities for families, contact your (COUNTY NAME) office of the University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service.

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