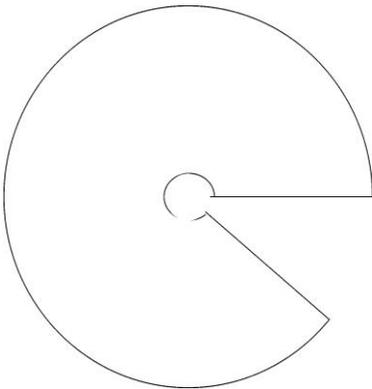


Critter Corner: Feeding the birds and ONLY the birds – Dave DeCalesta 9/2014

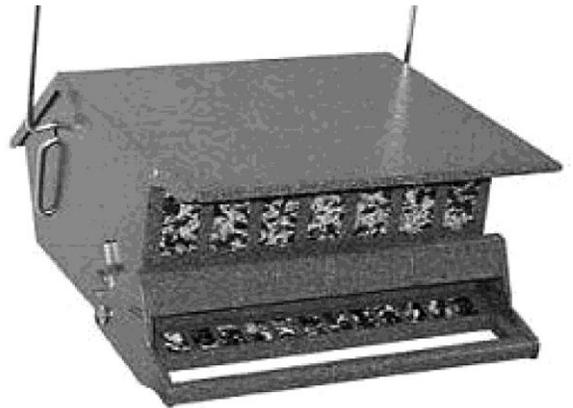
As anyone who has fed wild birds with bird feeders knows, those little feathered friends add a splash of color to our yards, bring us closer to wildlife, and are just fun and entertaining to watch. Problem is, there is a host of free-loaders who also want a free lunch, and they can rapidly empty and/or destroy bird feeders. Free-loaders include bears, raccoons, squirrels, chipmunks, 'possums, and deer, as well as unwanted birds such as crows, grackles and (maybe) blue jays. In addition to looting bird feeders, bears usually destroy them as they chew their way to the seeds/suet blocks. So, how to feed the birds we want, and exclude the other critters?

The large free-loaders (bear, raccoons, 'possums and deer) generally use bird feeders at night, so taking bird feeders (including the suet cages) in at night, EVERY NIGHT, pretty much eliminates their depredations, plus those of flying squirrels, which are nocturnal.

We are left with squirrels, chipmunks, and a few birds. Squirrels and chipmunks can climb those shepherd crooks and other poles people use to hang bird seed and suet feeders from. We have all seen the metal or plastic cones that are affixed to poles below the feeders. These prevent squirrels and chipmunks from climbing up poles to reach the feeders. A single cone works well to deter chipmunks, but squirrels are usually agile enough to twist their bodies in strange ways to climb around the cones, so for squirrels you really need a second cone, placed about 8 inches below the first cone. If you're lucky, you can purchase a second cone that you can put on the pole. If not, and you're handy, you can make a second cone out of sheet metal (see instructions below) and place it below the first cone. You'll have to figure out a way to affix the cone to the pole, but if you are handy enough to make a cone, you'll be handy enough to figure out how to attach it to the pole. Do remember that squirrels can jump laterally about 2 feet, and can glide down to land on top of bird feeders, so you will have to place your feeders at least 2 feet away from trees and bushes they can leap from, and also avoid placing feeders below trees and tall shrubs they can drop down from.



Cut a circle out of sheet metal about 12" diameter. Cut a smaller circle out of the middle. Cut out the pie-shaped wedge. Pull the two cut edges together and pop rivet them together so they overlap a bit. This will form a cone with an open circle in the middle to fit around the pole.



The one exception to the above is the all-metal bird feeders with a spring-loaded perch (see right picture above). You can adjust the spring so that only small birds (chickadees, titmice, finches, sparrows, nuthatches, etc.) perching on it will not weigh it down, causing a barrier to slide down and cover the feeding tray. Squirrels, chipmunks, and the larger unwanted birds will be heavy enough to cause the barrier to slide down when they stand on the perch to rob the feeder. These feeders CAN be left out overnight (we never had bears attack them), but be sure that the catch that holds the top down (this is where you load the feeder by tilting up the top) is secured or raccoons will learn to open the top and empty the feeder. Also, if you feed only shelled safflower seeds, the word is that grackles will not eat them, which is important to know because grackles can land on and feed from feeders protected from squirrels by cones.

Enjoy the show. Oh, and by the way, feeding during summer provides extra nutrition to the parent birds as they expend tons of energy catching and feeding insects to their young. Feeding year 'round is best. For you and the birds.