

Backyard Birding

Attracting birds to your yard and identifying them once they get there



White-crowned Sparrow (photo: Tom Roach)

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What you need

Binoculars

You can spend \$80 to over \$2000 for a pair of binoculars, depending on your budget and level of commitment. I usually suggest that people start out with a pair in, at least, the \$100 to \$200 range. I also suggest you buy one with magnification power of around 8X (eight power). The extra magnification of 10X is generally not worth what you lose in light and field of view.

Feeders & Food

1. A hanging feeder filled with **Black Oil Sunflower** seeds
 - a. This will attract House Finches, two kinds of goldfinches, Oak Titmouse, White-breasted Nuthatches, Scrub Jays and others.
 - b. Add a Thistle Tube (either a separate feeder or a 2-tube or 3-tube feeder with one thistle tube) filled with **Niger Thistle** seed. The goldfinches and Pine Siskins love it and this type of feeder can be used exclusively by them.
2. A hummingbird feeder filled with **sugar water** at a ratio of 4:1 or 5:1 water to sugar volume. Remember, no coloring required. You can attract three different kinds of hummers, depending on the season.
 - a. Use at least one combo Oriole/Hummingbird feeder and you might attract Bullock's and/or Hooded Orioles!
3. A ground feeder with **White Millet**, Black Oil Sunflower seeds, cracked corn will attract many of the same species that come to a hanging feeder, plus many more ground dwellers including several different sparrows, doves, Dark-eyed Juncos, etc.
4. A **suet** feeder (use the big 4x4 inch cube with small mesh openings) can bring in four or five different kinds of woodpeckers, nuthatches and many other feathered surprises.

Other attractions

1. A water feature: This can be a simple birdbath, a small pond, a little waterfall. Moving or dripping water is most attractive. You can get all kinds of birds that will never come to feeders to visit water in any season.
2. Berry bushes in season will draw Cedar Waxwings, robins, mockingbirds and thrushes. See "Other books you may want" for more info.
3. Brush piles provide important cover for lots of ground loving birds like sparrows, towhees and quail.

Field Guide

If you want to identify the birds you attract, you will need a good field guide. I recommend either the *National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America* (make sure you get the new, 5th, edition) or *The Sibley Guide to Birds* by David Sibley (the most comprehensive field guide available, showing most plumages of most of our birds). Avoid field guides that use photos, although the new Kenn Kaufman guide is pretty good.

Other books you may want

Two great books on bird behavior, breeding, feeding preferences and other interesting facts are: *The Birder's Handbook* by Ehrlich, Dobkin & Wheye and *Lives of North American Birds* by Kenn Kaufman. A good book about gardening for birds is *Stokes Bird Gardening Book* by David and Lillian Stokes.

If you are interesting in learning how to identify birds by their songs and calls, pick up *Birding by Ear-Western Region* by Dick Walton. This is available as a set of CDs or cassettes and it is great!

Where to get equipment, books, feeders, etc.

There are several stores around, the closest I know of is Wild Birds Unlimited at 2561 Fair Oaks Boulevard.

Some of the Birds you might attract to your Yard

American Goldfinch
Lesser Goldfinch
Pine Siskin
House Finch
Song Sparrow
White-crowned Sparrow
Golden-crowned Sparrow
Fox Sparrow
House Sparrow
California Towhee
Spotted Towhee
Dark-eyed Junco
Black-headed Grosbeak
White-breasted Nuthatch
Oak Titmouse
Bullock's Oriole
American Robin
Hermit Thrush
Western Bluebird
Cedar Waxwing
Northern Mockingbird
European Starling
Western Scrub Jay
Yellow-billed Magpie
Mourning Dove
Rock Pigeon
Anna's Hummingbird
Black-chinned Hummingbird
Rufous Hummingbird
Downy Woodpecker
Nuttall's Woodpecker
Northern Flicker
Sharp-shinned Hawk
Cooper's Hawk

Identification Tips

Below are some tips to help you with some of the common identification challenges you might find when trying to decide just exactly WHO that is at your feeder.

House vs. Purple Finches

- Males
 - House Finch is boldly streaked on the belly and flanks-
- Purple is usually unstreaked
 - House Finch color and pattern is highly variable
 - Purple is suffused with wine red
- Male or Female
 - Purple has a larger bill and the top of the bill is straight, while the top of the House Finch bill is curved
- Female Purple has strong face pattern

Female Lesser vs. American Goldfinches in winter

- Americans more brown, Lessers more green
- Americans have more distinct white wing bars and paler (and larger) bills
- Americans often very pale to whitish underneath, Lessers generally more evenly greenish on underparts (look especially at the undertail coverts--underside just above the beginning of the tail)

Immature White vs. Golden-crowned Sparrows

- White-crowned will have a yellowish bill, Golden-crowned will have a darkish bill
- Golden-crowned can have very little markings on its crown, White-crowned will have reddish-brown stripes on the crown

The streaky sparrows (Song, Lincoln's and Fox)

- Song and Lincoln's both have strongly patterned heads, Fox Sparrows heads and faces are plain and dark
- Song Sparrows breast streaks are thick and bold, Lincoln's are fine.
- Lincoln's usually has a buffy wash across the breast and will often show a peak to its head.

Nuttall's vs. Downy Woodpeckers

- Nuttall's back has horizontal bars, Downy has a vertical white streak
- Nuttall's has speckles or streaks on the undersides, Downy is clean white underneath
- Downy shows more white on the face
- Downy has a proportionally smaller bill