

Feeding Wild Birds in America: Culture, Commerce, and Conservation

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BOOK REVIEW

Feeding Wild Birds in America: Culture, Commerce, and Conservation

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Feeding Wild Birds in America: Culture, Commerce, and Conservation by Paul J. Baicich, Margaret A. Barker, and Carrol L. Henderson. 2015. Texas A&M University Press, College Station, Texas. 306 pp. \$27.95 (flexbound). ISBN 978-1-62349-211-3.

More than 50 million Americans over the age of 16 feed wild birds and other wildlife around their homes, and hobbyists annually spend >\$5 billion on bird food, feeders, houses, baths, and other accessories (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2012). Given the hobby's popularity, this book by Baicich, Barker, and Henderson is a long overdue and comprehensive work that explores the past history and present developments of the wild bird feeding pastime, and provides an important overview for scientists studying impacts of anthropogenic food on wild bird populations.

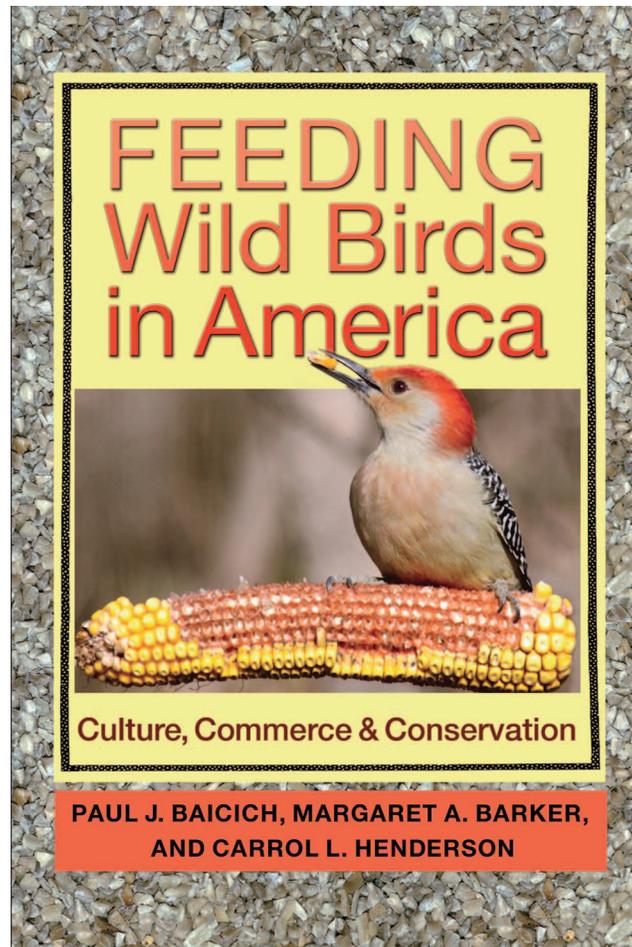
Feeding Wild Birds in America comprises 14 chapters that highlight each decade of the 20th century as well as information about bird feeding before 1900 and today. Each chapter contains sidebars devoted to other aspects of the bird feeding hobby such as the development of the bird bath, offering suet, and challenges with squirrels.

The book traces the bird feeding hobby from its origins as a way to appreciate and protect birds to the

present day when people who feed birds often develop strategies to feed particular species using specific food/feeder combinations. The days of feeding meat-bones and bacon-rinds are being replaced with sophisticated feeding stations containing multiple feeders with varying foods such as regional, seasonal, and no-mess seed blends. As the wild bird feeding hobby has grown, it has moved from food scraps to local feed stores to national chains of wild bird specialty stores.

The science of wild bird feeding is starting to catch up to the popularity of the practice. Scientists continue to learn more about topics such as the impact of wild bird feeding on bird populations (Robb et al. 2008), how supplemental food affects the health of individual birds (Wilcoxon et al. 2015), and why birds prefer particular seeds (Johansen et al. 2014). *Feeding Wild Birds in America* complements this scientific understanding by highlighting how we have come to offer the bird foods and feeders that we do. For example, it describes how current bird feeding norms began by describing the history of two of the most widely used seeds, black-oil sunflower and Nyjer.

Many of the feeder styles that we use today have changed little since their beginnings. The 1914 hopper feeder (figure 3.7) looks similar to modern hopper



feeders. The 1917 “Feeding Slab” developed by William Saunders (figure 3.5) to reduce feeder visits by House Sparrows (*Passer domesticus*) is reminiscent of current versions of suet feeders that require birds to hang upside down in order to prevent House Sparrows and European Starlings (*Sturnus vulgaris*) from feeding. Pedestal-type birdbaths from 1914 (figure 3.12) could be mistaken for birdbaths of today. On the other hand, new materials such as plastic allowed for the creation of the plastic tube feeder (figure 8.4), one of the most popular contemporary feeder types. Perhaps as a result of changes in personal tastes, manufacturing advances, and availability of better feeders, other feeder designs have become less popular over time, including the “Weather-vane Feeder” (figure 3.8).

If the past 100 years of bird feeding history are any indication, there will continue to be significant opportunities to innovate feeder and food products in the 21st century. Is there a perch style that dissuades House Sparrows from feeding while allowing others to perch? Are recycled plastic feeders more attractive to birds than wood feeders? What new seeds will change the bird feeding industry as black-oil sunflower and Nyjer have done in the past few decades? Is the use of industrial hemp as a food source going to make a resurgence? This book provides entrepreneurs with opportunities to innovate and scientists with research questions that can impact a hobby that, given the annual expenditures on wild bird food (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 2012), is likely to have introduced billions of pounds of supplemental food into the environment.

This book will appeal to a diverse audience including those who participate in the bird feeding hobby, are active in the industry, or study the impact of anthropogenic food on wild birds and the surrounding environment. It does an excellent job of describing trends in bird feeding from both the perspective of the retailer, entrepreneur, and the end consumers humans and birds. It will be of interest to those attempting to make their yard more attractive to wildlife and who want to protect wild birds. For example, it discusses some important conservation issues such as

bird–window collisions and outdoor cats, two of the leading causes of avian mortality connected with humans and sometimes associated with wild bird feeding (Klem 2014, Loss et al. 2015). Finally, information on citizen scientist projects such as Project FeederWatch (Bonter and Harvey 2008) is presented.

Thanks to Baicich, Barker, and Henderson, the tens of millions of people who feed wild birds in the U.S. now have a book that richly describes the history of one of America’s favorite hobbies. Bird feeding often has been considered a way to bring nature closer to us and a way to help birds. This book shows us how we have done so in the past, and will continue to do so far into the future.

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