

By Larry Reichenberger

# Bird feeding faceoff

Bird lovers participate in a continent-wide project to compare bird seed and feeders

**F**eeding birds is a popular practice, second only to gardening as a favorite backyard hobby. This pastime is enjoyed by 55 million people in the U.S., but despite that popularity, it remains more of an art than a science—little objective research is available to support the \$4 billion avocation. But now, a group of bird watching enthusiasts from the U.S. and Canada are trying to fill this information gap.

This winter, more than 200 volunteer “citizen scientists” from across the continent are completing a four-year study of the feed and feeder preferences of wild birds. Project Wildbird is a \$1 million effort being coordinated from Decatur, Ill., by Millikin University biology professor David Horn, with assistance from recent graduate Stacey Shonkwiler.

“Project Wildbird is a landmark study that will provide a better understanding of how the wild bird feeding experience can be enhanced,” says Horn. “There’s very little scientific information available on this subject, and research has never been done with the intensity and range of this effort.”

**Attracting favorites.** Roughly a million bird feeder visits have been logged by project participants since the research began in 2005. “Each volunteer selected as a citizen scientist receives four feeders and 10 types of bird feed. Tubular, platform, and hopper feeders are also compared, but a participant receives only one type,” explains Shonkwiler. “They check the feeders every 5 minutes for a 45-minute period every other day and submit their bird observations online.”

**Top left:** Safflower, black oil sunflowers, white proso millet, and Nyjer are among the bird seed being tested.  
**Left:** Sandi Frame of suburban Kansas City has been a citizen scientist with Project Wildbird for two years.

“The findings will help us answer a number of questions, including what seed birds prefer, if those preferences vary by the season or by geographic area, if birds prefer different feeders, and if there is any interaction between seed and feeders,” says Horn. “Our goal is to provide bird enthusiasts information about the best ways to attract the species they would most like to see on their property. If they want to attract indigo buntings or rose-breasted grosbeaks, then we’ll know the eating preferences of those species.”

Sandi Frame of Overland Park, Kan., who has cooperated with Project Wildbird for two years, says the four hopper-type feeders have been an entertaining addition to her backyard. “I’ve always enjoyed feeding birds and was anxious to cooperate. Our most frequent visitors have been mourning doves while sunflower seed, Nyjer, and white proso millet have been the most popular seed,” she says.

**How to participate.** Preliminary results from Project Wildbird are available on the Internet at [www.projectwildbird.org](http://www.projectwildbird.org). Final results, and a series of research reports, will be available on that site when completed. Meanwhile, there’s still time to participate.

“The data collection period for citizen scientists is closed,” says biologist Horn, “but there’s still time for people who enjoy feeding birds to participate in a related survey. As part of the project, we want to explore the human dimension of bird feeding and have developed a survey (accessible on the Web site) for that purpose.

“We want people to tell us when, where, and why they enjoy feeding birds; what types of birds they enjoy feeding; and any problems they’ve encountered,” he continues. “The responses also will help us to provide recommendations that can help make the wild bird feeding experience more enjoyable.” ■



Among birds attracted to Project Wildbird feeders are the colorful red-bellied woodpecker (above). The black-capped chickadee (top right) and female northern cardinal (center right) were among the ten most frequent visitors at the feeders, while the tufted titmouse (lower right) was less common.

BIRD PHOTOGRAPHY: DAVID SEIBEL, PH.D.