

Backyard Birding Starter Guide

How to attract, identify, and log the birds in your yard

Birding starts in your own backyard. With the right feeder setup and a decent field guide, you can identify 20+ species in a single morning without leaving home. This guide gets your setup right from day one.

The feeder setup that works

- Start with two feeders: a tube feeder for sunflower seeds (finches, chickadees, nuthatches) and a suet cage (woodpeckers, wrens).
- Location: 10-30 feet from a window for safe viewing; near shrubs so birds have cover to escape from hawks.
- Black-oil sunflower seed attracts the widest variety. Safflower repels squirrels (and grackles).

Identifying what you see

- Note size (sparrow/robin/crow scale), body shape, beak shape, and color patterns.
- The Cornell Lab's free Merlin app ID's birds from a photo or from sound — the biggest shortcut in birding.
- Male birds are usually more colorful; females of the same species look different.

The life list and eBird

- A 'lifer' is a species you see for the first time. Your life list is every lifer you've logged.
- eBird (free, Cornell Lab) is the standard logging tool. Log every outing and your data contributes to global research.
- A Big Year is when a birder tries to see as many species as possible in one calendar year.

Insider glossary

- **Lifer** — A bird species seen for the very first time — always a memorable moment.
- **Pishing** — Making a 'psh-psh-psh' sound to attract curious birds out of cover.
- **Fallout** — When a weather event grounds large numbers of migrating birds in one spot — a birder's jackpot.
- **Life List** — Your personal catalog of every species you've ever seen and confirmed.

Starter checklist

- Tube feeder + black-oil sunflower seed
- Suet cage + suet cake
- Binoculars (8x42 is the standard)
- Merlin app (free, Cornell Lab)
- eBird account
- A field guide for your region

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