



When winter begins to nip at noses and toes, it's time to think about helping our wildlife. Many animals struggle to find food, water and shelter during the depths of the cold weather. Of course, you can't protect them from everything – that's the way the ecosystem works, but you can do something to help.



Now, some people will say that we shouldn't help wildlife in any circumstance, and that we should let nature take its course. That might be right if we lived in a truly 'natural' environment, but we don't. We have changed the natural environment so much that wildlife struggles more than it should. That being the case, I reckon we owe it to them to help!

So what can we do? Well, there are a number of things. (Look at our 'So why not help Wildlife' sheet.) *Hibernacula* are a great idea. Bundles of twigs will provide homes for over-wintering insects. You could build a hedgehog hibernation box. (Look it up on the internet.)



Bird boxes can be useful to birds as roosting places during cold weather, and there are many more ideas. Look up ideas on the internet. The birds might return to them in the spring to lay their eggs. (DON'T put kitchen scraps out when chicks are in the nest. Always ensure that peanuts are fed through a proper feeder. Young birds can choke on whole nuts.)



Try making a stumpery. They are always good for wildlife. (See our article on it.)

What about feeding the birds? Yes, the birds are probably the first wild animals that spring to mind. I guess it's because we see them more easily than other animals. (In fact there are more mammals in Britain than birds, but they keep out of our way!) We should remember that the birds do a great job for us in eating many pests.



So what's the best way to do it? Try putting out feeders. Ground feeding tables are the favourite for robins, blackbirds and others. This just needs to be a low table that you can keep clean. You could even make one very easily. (Perhaps not a good idea if you own a cat!)



A bird table, off the ground, is great. You can put out food scraps, (nothing mouldy, spicy or salty – salty food makes them thirsty.) Soak dry bread. Some birds like seeds. Others, like starlings, will eat just about anything! You could try making a bird cake.

Just melt some lard in a pan. **(Get an adult to help you!)** Mix in any food scraps from the kitchen. Add some seeds, dried fruit, etc. Pour it into a bowl and leave it to cool. Put it in the fridge overnight. Next morning, put it on your bird table and stand back! Once the birds have found it, they'll be down!

Don't forget to give them clean water. **NEVER** add anything to it. You could try floating a small ball – perhaps a table tennis ball – in the bird bath to help stop it freezing. If it does freeze, try to get the ice out and refill with clean water.



Try hanging feeders for the small birds. They don't compete too well with larger birds on the ground or table. Put in peanuts, seeds, nyger – or niger – the seed is a big favourite with goldfinches. You could hang up fat balls. Try drilling a log with quite large holes. Fill these full of fat and hang them up. Watch the small birds come to them.

If you don't have trees to hang feeders on, you can buy special poles, (or make them yourself). Push it into the ground and hang up your feeders. Put them in a spot where they feel safe, giving them a clear view around the garden. Try to put it fairly close to somewhere where they can get to cover easily, but not too close to shrubs where cats might hide.

We know that we should be eating healthy foods, including our five fruits and veg per day to stay healthy, but there is also a healthy diet for birds. **Seeds** and **fruits** are always good. Many of thrush family and others will enjoy **fruit**, such as apples and pears. Try **suet**, as it's full of fat. **Porridge oats** are great! They also love **cheese**, which is good for their feathers, as well as being full of warming fat.

Of course, you might want to go further. You could try planting the right plants. Vertical surfaces, such as walls, can be planted with climbers, such as clematis, honeysuckle and pyracantha, or perhaps ivy, which will provide food and shelter late in the year. Plant up your borders with shrubs to provide hiding places. Nectar producers are best, as they'll bring in the insects for the birds to eat. Holly trees, crab apples etc. are great in a large border.

Please don't tidy your garden too much during the winter. Leave the fallen leaves on the ground. They'll rot in and provide you with new compost. Blackbirds and thrushes love to turn them over to find insects and other invertebrates to eat. Leave on old seed heads, as they provide a food source. (And it will save you a lot of hard work!)



Come on. We can all do this. We can help our local wildlife, and help to make up for all of the wrongs that we do to it.