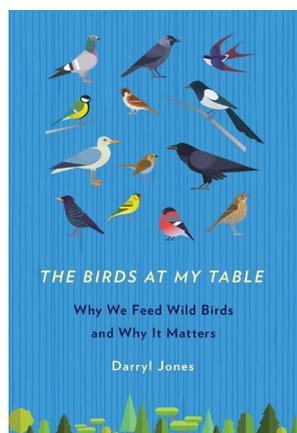


Book Review



The Birds at My Table

Jones, Darryl. 2018. New South Publishing. Paperback 327 pp., ISBN 9781742235974. RRP \$25.50

Many people view feeding wild birds in the backyard as just a quaint pastime practised by a few keen bird lovers. So wrong! It is a global phenomenon stretching back at least 3500 years and conducted now on an enormous scale, but being especially prevalent in Europe, North America and Oceania. Surveys show that about 28%

of Australian households feed wild birds with seed and 29% hand-feed or feed birds on the ground. In New Zealand cities 63% of survey respondents fed wild birds, in Leeds, England, the percentage varied from 38% to 70% and the percentages for Michigan and Arizona in the USA were 66% and 43%, respectively. America-wide, an astonishing 53 million people reported feeding wildlife (mostly birds) and overall in the UK 64% of households indulge in this activity. The practice has spawned what is now a huge global industry in manufacturing bird foods and the feeders in which they are provided for wild birds. As one example, in America bird food sales were worth US\$4.07 billion in 2011 and a further \$US969 million can be added for “non-seed peripherals”, and the industry is growing annually. It is an activity that had traditionally tended to be encouraged by the official ornithological organizations in in Europe and North America, but discouraged in Australia.

Darryl Jones is a long-time avid backyard wild bird feeder, but also a professor at the Environmental Futures Research Institute at Griffith University in Brisbane and a prolific author. This combination has led him to think deeply about the practice of feeding wild birds and the many important questions it raises and to explore these questions in detail in this fascinating and eminently readable book. The book is based on the work of his own research group, a massive literature review of other researchers’ work and extensive journeys that he undertook around the world to pick the brains of key figures in the wild bird feeding phenomenon.

Jones discusses how the practice of only feeding wild birds in winter, which was understandably so prevalent in northern Europe, has gradually morphed into year-round feeding, despite the initial strong disapproval of the main European ornithological institutions. This change was influenced by a relatively small number of people, including such personalities as Bill Oddie and Peter Berthold (of bird migration research fame), and eventually the major ornithological institutions relented.

One of the central issues that the author tackles concerns the supposed benefits and disadvantages of wild bird feeding for the birds themselves. Benefits often claimed include improving the birds’ welfare during times of food scarcity, enhancing survival and helping to slow or stop the decline of endangered and threatened species. There is sound experimental evidence for the north temperate zone that supplementary feeding does sometimes enhance winter survival and even improve survival

of chicks in the following breeding season because their supplementarily fed parents are in better condition. There is also solid evidence that supplementary feeding can be critical in the conservation and recovery of highly endangered species. Perhaps one of the classical stories here is the insightful and ingenious supplementary feeding of the strange New Zealand ground parrot, the Kakapo, translocated to Little Barrier Island off the north-eastern coast of New Zealand’s North Island, which led to the production of more eggs and better survival of chicks in years when natural masting triggered breeding. On the other hand, there are experiments on the effects of supplementary feeding on breeding in small passerines elsewhere in which the most common response of the birds was none!

There are several alleged negative effects of wild bird feeding. These include inducing dependence on the supplementary food and favouring the spread and dominance of aggressive exotic species over native species. There are also the problems of feeding low nutrient and even toxic foods to the birds and facilitating the spread of serious avian diseases that cause much mortality through the high levels of contact of birds at feeders and the poor hygiene sometimes practised by feeder owners. Perhaps one of the best-known examples of the disease threat is the spread of mycoplasma conjunctivitis through House Finch populations in the USA, which was attributed to their obtaining the pathogen from the feeders at which they aggregated. Ironically, however, the fact that infected finches often stay close to feeders presents a potential opportunity to treat them if a suitable antidote becomes available.

The other core issue that the author explores in this remarkable book is why humans feed wild birds, and the answer is complex. An English survey produced three somewhat heterogeneous motivational groupings for feeding wild birds which, in order of descending importance, were: human pleasure and bird survival; the need to nurture, children’s education and connection with nature, and reparation for humans’ environmental damage and companionship. An Australian survey produced broadly similar results, except that humanistic motivations (emphasising the relationship between feeder and avian visitor) were more important here than among UK feeders and moralistic motivations (emphasising care and personal responsibility for the birds) were more important among UK than Australian feeders. Overall what the various surveys have shown is that we are motivated to feed wild birds by many factors, but especially the need to assist their survival and the personal reward of the feeding experience.

I have only scratched the surface of what the author covers in this outstanding book. It is scholarly, meticulously researched, wide-ranging and extremely thought-provoking. Jones’ descriptions of his many visits to experts on wild bird feeding are especially entertaining; you feel you almost know the people he is interviewing and are on the journey with him! There are also some lovely little flashes of a dry, almost whimsical humour, surprisingly not at all out of place in a scientific book on this topic. I found a few parts of the narrative a bit repetitious, and frequently referring forward to material to come later in the book was slightly irritating, but these are very minor criticisms. Even if you are an ornithologist who is not particularly interested in wild bird feeding, read this book! I learned so much, I could not put it down and, as with many a good novel that I have read, I felt just a tinge of sadness when I got to the last page!

Alan Lill
La Trobe University, Melbourne