



Birds of El Paso County

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Spring Preparation



Hummingbird loving the fresh nectar.



Female Lesser Gold finch eating the natural sunflower



Spring decorative grasses make great nesting material.

Happy spring in Colorado! Fall has always been my favorite season of the year for the amazing beauty Colorado has to offer. For birds, spring is by far the best time of the year. This month, I want to talk about getting your yard ready for spring and to maximize your chances of getting some beautiful migrating birds to visit and stick around as long as you can. With a little preparation ahead of the spring migration, you can easily have a yard full of Orioles, Tanagers, Grosbeaks, Hummingbirds and Buntings.

Before I start talking about how to prep your yard for spring migration, I will back up and try to emphasize the importance of feeding birds through the winter. No matter what you do for your yard in the spring, If you don't have some birds already occupying your yard before the migration comes through, there is very little chance you will see many of the amazingly beautiful birds that migrate through El Paso County every spring. Remember, El Paso County may be the final destination for some of these birds but many of them are just here for a few short days on their way farther north.

When birds migrate, they will follow the same route year after year. Migrating birds use water ways as landmarks from the sky. Birds will follow the main rivers and depending on their final destination, they will follow streams and creeks as they branch off the rivers. Studies have even shown that some birds will use the interstate road systems to navigate.

If you attracted migrating birds to your yard in the past, there is a good chance your yard is part of their route for years to come. Many birds fly hundreds and thousands of miles to migrate and will return to the same backyard every year to stop for food and even nest. Do not wait until it is too late to attract them. If you are new to spring migration and you want birds to put you

on their route, it is important to feed the local birds year round. When birds are migrating, they don't look for fancy feeders or who has the freshest food out. They simply look for other birds. You could have 20 feeders out with the best feed you can get. If there is no bird activity in your yard as migrators pass by, they won't stop.

Migrating birds look for bird activity. This is their sign that things are safe down there and that there is probably food and water. Many people ignore the birds during the winter because it is cold and they can't sit out and enjoy the birds. If you wait until you see or hear of birds migrating through and then try to attract them, chances are, it's too late. Get ahead of the game weeks before they come through.

I started to focus on getting ahead of the migration several years ago. I went from seeing a couple of Orioles and Tanagers stop by for a day and that was it. Now I can have as many as 30 orioles stay for several weeks at a time. I get Tanagers and Buntings coming and going well into the summer months. I started putting out my jelly and oranges a few weeks ago. I have Robins and Finches eating from those feeding stations already. When the migrating Orioles and Tanagers come though, they will be attracted to the bird activity first and then find the fruits and jellies they love so much.

If you have not started getting ready yet, start now!! You don't want to waste a bunch of fruit, jelly and nectar so start with small amounts and place feeders where you can observe them. Once you see the first migrators to that specific feed, you can then start putting out more food and even place feeders in different areas. For example, I usually put out 6 Hummingbird feeders for the season. Until I see the first Hummingbirds, I only put 2 feeders at my kitchen window and I only put about an inch of nectar in them. Nectar needs to

be changed out and feeders cleaned every few days so there is no need to put out so many feeders and waste so much. You may start seeing your first hummingbirds by mid April. Remember, any food that is sweet can ferment and mold very fast on a warm day so these kinds of food should be changed out frequently. You can make your own Hummingbird food and keep it stored in the refrigerator for several weeks. 4 to 1 is the standard mix for hummingbird nectar. 4 cups of water to 1 cup of sugar. I usually make a double batch every 3 weeks. So, 8 cups of water to 2 cups of sugar. Boil the exact amount of water. Just bring the water to a boil and then remove it from the heat. Mix the sugar in really good and let it cool. Once the nectar is at room temp, mix it again to make sure the sugar is mixed in well and then put it in the refrigerator.

Use Grape jelly or jams for the Orioles, Tanagers, Robins and finches. I have found that they don't care much for preserves. No fancy brands are needed. Oranges and apples are loved by many birds. I shared a picture of one of my feeding stations with the oranges and jellies but a fancy feeding station isn't necessary. You can put orange halves on a nail on the fence or on a tree and jelly in any kind of little bowl. You may start seeing Orioles any time now. Tanagers will be a few weeks later. Getting all these feeds out in advance will better you chance at them coming more often and staying longer. Although you might only see a couple of these birds for the next few weeks, if they come to the yard and these kinds of food are not there, they will leave and not return.

For other migrating birds like Buntings, Grosbeaks, and others, standard bird food mixes work well. Black sunflower seed and peanuts are a big hit with almost all of them. Buntings and Grosbeaks will occasionally feed on the oranges but the seed is the food they are mostly attracted

to. Try to keep some distance between the types of food.

Finally, yard maintenance is very important. I know people like to clean up the gardens from the winter and it is fine to trim down old shrubs and flowers. Just don't throw all of that out but rather than throw it all out, make small piles around the yard. You can throw all of that out towards the end of summer. This material serves many purposes for the birds. While many bushes and shrubs are without leaves for cover, many ground birds will use these piles for cover. Other birds will use the sticks and twigs for nesting material. Old dried sunflowers provide great nesting material for small birds. I included a picture of some Pampas grass that I trim down every year. The silky soft plumes at the top are loved and used by many birds especially Hummingbirds. You can even strip some of that off and put it in a suit feeder and hang it on the fence or in a tree. Birds will come and pull pieces out to use in the nest. I know people like to pull weeds up from under the feeders that grow from spilled seed but try to let some stay and grow. Natural sunflowers and other weeds are edible and have usable materials for the birds. Water is also very critical all year but especially as the days start to warm up. It is important that bird baths be cleaned and filled daily. Many diseases can be transferred by birds sharing that water. If at all possible, have several bird baths out.

I truly hope you get a yard full of some of the amazing migrating birds that El Paso County sees. Feel free to write or message me with questions or even your own stories about the migrating birds in your yard. Happy birding!

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Feeding station setup for the migrating Orioles, Tanagers, and many other visitors.



Bullock's Orioles and House Finches enjoying some fresh orange.



Mama Robin dipping a grasshopper in the jelly for the kids.