Feeding Birds and Other Wild Animals on a Budget

by Mary Jo Fahey

Do you ever wonder where God’s smallest creatures find food? They rely on humans. Small animals often need to forage for food all day long. If you watch closely, you may see birds eating discarded garbage in mall parking lots. While animal feeders at many retailers can be expensive, there are some low-budget solutions for feeding birds and small animals in your yard.

Bless the Beasts and the Children

Finding ways to feed wild animals on a budget is the right thing to do. The “other” that’s mentioned in the Golden Rule refers to all life—not just humans:

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

Luke 6:31

Thirty years ago, there were films and television programs that reminded us that we are not the only ones on the planet. Many stories helped raise consciousness and move society upward on their path of social development. Today, it’s hard to find a definition for the words “socially conscious” on the Internet that does not include the word “investment.” Socially conscious films and television have mostly disappeared but they once contained life-affirming themes such as tolerance and compassion. An example, from movie director Stanley Kramer, whose entire career revolved around the socially conscious film genre, is Bless the Beasts and the Children [1971]. The movie’s soundtrack contains inspirational song lyrics about life around us that God has entrusted to our care. The Bless the Beasts and the Children song, sung by The Carpenters and composed by Barry De Vorzon and Perry Botkin, Jr., was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Original Song and a Grammy Award for Best Original Score Written for a Motion Picture.

Bless the beasts and the children
for in this world they have no voice
they have no choice
Bless the beasts and the children
for the world can never be
the world they see

Readers who are old enough to remember Karen Carpenter, can watch a video of her singing Bless the Beasts and the Children on YouTube.com. Kramer, who passed away at age 87 in 2001, produced a half-dozen Hollywood films. Hopefully Hollywood will steer away from films about vampires and sorcerors and deliver more films that are positive, holistic and world-affirming.

Bird Feeders for Small Birds That Perch

Tube feeders provide bird perches that replicate tree branches. The low-cost Perky Pet Sierra Sierra Bird Feeder contains four plastic perches mounted next to ports where birds can access bird seed. Although each port contains an optional hinged thistle door for small Nyjer seeds, the door does not work very well. I leave the port doors open and fill the tube with mixed bird seed. Look for the Sierra Feeder in the Wal-Mart Garden Department [$3-4] and on Ace Hardware’s Web site [$6.99]. Note: Ace Hardware offers free shipping to their local stores.

[Optional Stock Photo Caption] Wild birds and small animals who are shy at first—warm up when they realize that you are a caregiver.

This free-of-rights photograph is available in different sizes at istockphoto.com. Photos are purchased with credits that cost $1.50:

File # 2838680
Small 805 × 596 px, 11.2” × 8.3,” 72 dpi, 3 credits
Medium 1834 × 1360 px 6.1” × 4.5,” 300 dpi, 6 credits
Farm & Fleet’s Wild Bird Food
Although most supermarkets sell bags of bird seed, I find that the ten or twenty pound bags of Blain’s Farm and Fleet’s Wild Bird Food is a better buy. The mix contains millet and black oil sunflower seeds. Ten pounds costs $3.99. Twenty pounds costs $5.99 and the larger bags are sometimes on sale. [Note: tube feeders hold about two pounds of seed].

Shepherd's Hooks With a Step-on Base
Tube feeders with perches on four sides need space. My favorite support is a steel shepherd’s hook with a convenient “step-on” base that anchors the hook six inches into the ground. The tube feeder’s looped handle can be placed on the hook’s “curl.” Family Dollar stores sell 4 foot shepherd’s’ hooks for $3.50 and Ace Hardware’s Web site has a similar hook for $7.99 [Pancea 48 inch Single Shepherd Hook]. Ace Hardware also sells 6 and 8 foot shepherd’s hooks.

Feeding Larger Birds, Chipmunks and Squirrels
Birds such as Cardinals, Robins, Woodpeckers and Doves and are too large for tube feeders. Bird seed for larger birds can be placed on a plate, a tray, or sprinkled on the ground. When I noticed that chipmunks and squirrels liked the black oil sunflower seeds in the Wild Bird Food mix, I searched for a bag of just sunflower seeds and discovered the best price at Wal-Mart. A ten pound bag of MorningSong Black Oil Sunflower Seeds is $7.99. In a farming state, there are even lower prices at an agricultural supply stores. For example, the Oregon Farm Center at 4636 State Street in Oregon, Wisconsin (Route 138 between Oregon and Stoughton) sells a 50 pound bag for $15.75.

Black oil sunflower seeds have a black, paper-like shell that squirrels will leave behind. I use an unpainted wooden 12 inch X 12 inch shadow box from the wood crafts department at Michael’s craft store as a tray to hold the black oil sunflower seeds. The shape is similar to bird seed trays sold in garden stores but the price [$7.99] is about a third of the cost of the trays designed for bird seed. Because Michael’s is a national chain, discount coupons may also be found on the Internet. I found a 45% off coupon that brought the price to $4.63 [with sales tax]. Walnut oil, that does not turn rancid, is the best choice for seasoning the wood to protect it from moisture. Woodman’s sells a pint of Roland Walnut oil for $5.99. When the shadow box is placed flat on the ground, it looks like a small sand box that’s about two inches deep. I’ve learned to place one layer of sunflower seeds in the middle of the box so I don’t waste seeds when I dump out the shells. I pour about a cup of seed into the middle of the box and then shake it to spread out the seeds.

Unsalted Peanuts-in-the Shell
Squirrels, chipmunks and Woodpeckers love whole peanuts in-the-shell. All three will grab peanuts soon after you put them out. The monounsaturated fat in peanuts will help animals add body weight that they need as insulation for cold Wisconsin winters.

Woodman’s used to have bins of peanuts that they sold in bulk. Even though the price that they charge for peanuts is still low, the peanuts are now sealed in uniform plastic bags. Their Sachs brand is $2.29 for a 1.5 pound bag. You can also ask the produce staff at Woodman’s for a Sachs twenty-five pound box that costs $28. Cub Foods sells whole peanuts in bulk for $1.69 per pound.

The nutrition in peanuts, that exceeds many other foods, may explain why larger birds and small animals love them. Animals seem to have an instinct for selecting nutritious food. Peanuts are high in protein [27%] that is used for tissue repair, they provide monounsaturated fat that’s used for energy, they are a source of dietary fiber, they contain 13 Vitamins [including A,
B group, C and E] and 26 minerals including calcium and iron. Like humans, animals can convert monounsaturated fat to saturated fat as needed — for making hormones and vitamin D.

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[Optional Stock Photo Caption] Tray feeders are a form of feeder that can accommodate larger birds and small animals. Black oil sunflower seeds have a black, paper-like shell that can be seen in this photo. A 12 inch X 12 inch shadow box from the wood crafts department at Michael’s craft stores may be used as a tray feeder and it’s much less expensive than trays from bird supply companies.

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[Caption] The Perky Pet Sierra Sierra Bird Feeder is available at Wal-Mart Garden Department for $3-4.

The Pancea 48 inch Single Shepherd Hook for mounting a tube bird feeder costs $10 at Ace Hardware. Family Dollar stores carry a similar shepherd hook for $7 but the stores often sell out.

[Note to the Editor] These digital photos are from the manufacturers and I can send them as e-mail attachments.