

Most backyard naturalists are content with feeding songbirds, hummingbirds, maybe a few quail and doves, squirrels and chipmunks. We have mixed emotions when the predators show up to help themselves to the smorgasbord attracted to the feeders - I've seen a Coopers hawk pick off a robin, sharp-shinned hawks with juncos. Part of me (probably the 20-year vegetarian...) goes "Oh, NO!," while another part (undoubtedly the raptor rehabilitator) goes "Oh, WOW!"

Bird-watching is bird-watching, after all. Given the position of raptors at the top of their food webs, they are less plentiful than other birds feeding lower down the pyramid. Birds of prey may not be colorful or herald in the dawn with song, but the heart of the watcher lucky enough to see one cannot help but be lifted by its grace and sheer presence. So, how do you attract them to your yard?

First of all, simply feeding songbirds is going to attract their predators. Predators are opportunists: where its food is congregated, sooner or later will come the hunter. Among the diurnal raptors, American kestrels are likely to inhabit any open areas, feeding variously on insects like grasshoppers during the summer, mice and other small rodents, and small birds. You can put up nest boxes to attract kestrels. An area with more woods cover is likely to host sharp-shinned hawks and maybe Coopers hawks on migration, even if your neighborhood is too human-populated to attract them year-round. These woodland hawks (accipiters) are amazing aerobats and awesome to watch as they maneuver through heavy cover chasing their primary food, songbirds. I've seen a sharpie following so close on a junco that, when the junco bounced off a screened window in an evasion attempt, the hawk did the exact same loop. Large, open areas may attract red-tailed hawks or other buteos (soaring hawks) by virtue of the squirrels and chipmunks, maybe even wild rabbits, attracted to your feeders or the food on the ground.

Even owls are often attracted to a by-product of feeders: the rodents who come quietly by night to feast on the spilled seed. Screech owls are often close to human habitation, attracted by the mice who follow us around, as well as the moths and other insects attracted to our lights and gardens. A patch of mature trees, especially oaks and maples whose loss of heavy limbs often make great roost cavities, a few vacant lots or a nice park are a good formula for a screech owl family. In the Northwest, pygmy owls can frequently be found in rural/suburban edge habitat, especially with a supply of songbirds (the favorite food of this daytime hunter) at feeders and nature-scaped yards. Nest boxes in wooded areas can attract small owls; in open country, a larger box may invite occupation by barn owls.

Should you purposefully feed raptors? Probably not. Remember, you ARE feeding them by creating what is, in effect, a somewhat unnatural congregation of their food items at your backyard feeders. It is often difficult to attract them to food that isn't moving, for only some of the raptors are naturally scavengers. Raptors are territorial and it's unlikely you will attract any but those already living there; the continued presence of any other is likely to open border skirmishes. It would be impossible to provide a balanced diet for raptors without providing

whole animals... Anyone willing to provide mice, rats or, say, day-old chickens? Very young animals (like day-old chicks) used as food need supplements to meet the requisite calcium/phosphorus levels and ratio. A pure meat or organ diet is grossly and dangerously deficient in calcium and a perfect prescription for metabolic bone disease, especially if your neighborhood raptors are feeding their own, fast-growing chicks with the food you supply. Organ meats from commercially grown chickens may be high in the food additives used to make chickens put on weight quickly: steroids and antibiotics. Finally, those predators that enrapture you may enrage your neighbor. It is simply not fair to habituate these birds to hand-outs or attract them into danger - that, to me, is a betrayal.

Why would someone feel the need to feed raptors? If simply trying to attract them to your yard, putting up nest boxes and attracting their natural food supply is a better solution. If you want to supplement them during a weather-related food shortage, you may not be doing them any favors. Many species of raptors are not true migrants, but they will move around in keeping with their food supply. Unless you are willing to meet the ENTIRE food needs of the raptor in your yard, you are doing it a disservice by keeping it from seeking more plentiful food elsewhere. A small active bird like a kestrel can eat its own body weight in food each day (depending on the caloric content of that food, and the time of the year: i.e., energy demands of cold weather, nesting, molting). If trying to distract them from the smorgasbord of prey species you have attracted to your feeders, forget it! Studies with feral or barn cats have shown that feeding them simply makes them healthier, more capable hunters; it does not keep them from hunting. My guess is that, given a choice, raptors would select the food on the wing. Best to provide your songbirds and quail with cover for when the raptors come to dine!

All in all, rather than feeding raptors (or raccoons or many other species that are trying to co-exist in the human-dominated landscape), you can make more positive, far-reaching contributions by the following actions and omissions: landscape with native plants that provide food and shelter at different times of the year for different species; provide a water feature; put up nest boxes; get rid of all or most of your lawn - it's a desert, in terms of wildlife habitat; don't use chemical fertilizers, pesticides, herbicides, rodenticides. It's hard not to get on a soapbox here, but there has been an alarming correlation reported in the veterinary literature of increased lympho-sarcoma in dogs whose owners use weed-and-feed products, and you can be sure it's not just in dogs. Rehabilitators see wildlife with signs of toxicity coming from areas with recent use of chemical fertilizers or slug bait. And there really is no such thing as a safe pesticide, rodenticide, or herbicide - they're designed to kill. Remember, survival of the fittest dictates that a young screech owl perfecting its hunting skills is much more likely to go after the Japanese beetle spinning in circles from organo-phosphate poisoning (it's a neuro-toxin) than the unaffected, sure-flying one; same for poisoned mice. Be a good citizen of the wider community and enjoy the diversity of nature! If you create a balanced community, the raptors will be there, too.