



Providing Water for Birds

by Dean Bolton

We humans have gotten so used to taking showers that we forget the joys of a bath, until, perhaps we look outside to see a House Finch splashing in the bird bath. One spring, a warbler practically dove into the bath in our backyard. It splashed around so much that my wife and I still can't agree what kind of warbler it was.

It is for these experiences that we offer backyard birds water. Birds will use water for drinking and bathing year-round. Water may even bring a greater variety of birds to your yard because it will attract non-seed eating birds such as wrens and robins.

Bird baths require nothing fancy. A plant saucer, garbage can lid, hub cap, or shallow pan will do. Make sure whatever you use is no more than 2 or 3 inches deep because birds like to stand in the water as they bathe.

The bath and water should be kept clean. During the summer, it may be necessary to add fresh water daily. Clean the bath regularly with a good scrubbing. To thoroughly disinfect the bath, use one part bleach to nine parts water solution. Be sure to completely rinse the bath with water before refilling.

Water dripping at a rate of 10 to 20 seconds per minute will make your bath particularly inviting to birds. You need nothing elaborate. A dripping garden hose over a tree branch or a water-filled bucket with a tiny hole placed 4 to 5 feet above the bath will attract birds. Make sure the hole in the bucket is small and punched on the side about one-half inch from the bottom. Even the tiniest debris will clog a hole in the bottom of a bucket.

Misters and drippers are also available. Most connect to your faucet; the attachment sits in the middle of the bath creating a mist or drip. Try turning your water on at the same time each day when you are home. The birds will learn when to expect the treat and you'll be there to watch them.

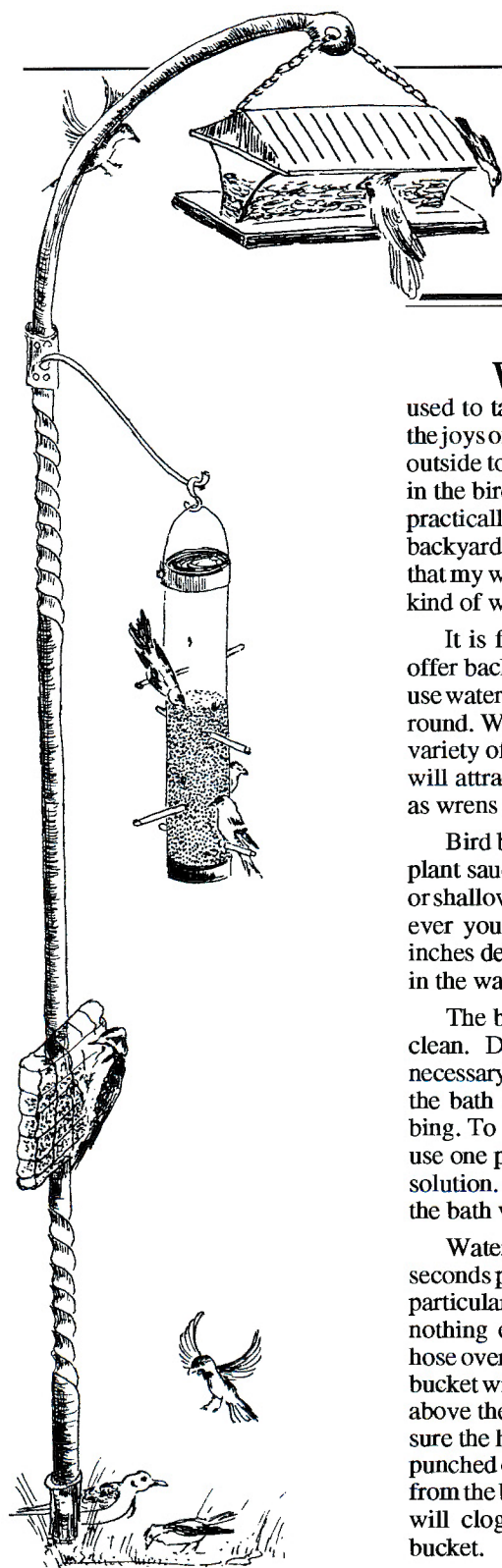
An unfrozen source of water can be welcome to birds during our cold Illinois winters. Plastic baths are the safest to use during cold weather because concrete and ceramic can crack when the water freezes. When the water in my plastic bath dish is frozen, I just turn it over and pop it out like an ice cube.

If you prefer a concrete or ceramic bath during the cold months, heating units are available. Several baths on the market today have built-in heating units. The heaters are regulated to keep the water just above freezing; many have thermostats that will shut off the heater if the bath runs out of water or the temperature rises above freezing.

A bath should be placed next to cover such as bushes and shrubs or even right on the ground since that is where birds are used to finding water. It also makes it easier for fledglings to reach.

The nearby cover also appeals to birds because they typically fly to the nearest tree or shrub to dry and preen their feathers. They will also have a quick escape route. But if you know cats are in the area, place the bath out in the open and on a pedestal so the birds will see the cats well in advance.

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Drawing by Denis Kania