

Using Garden Birds to create awareness of Biodiversity in Schools 2013

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A boy from 2nd class Milford National School, Limerick watching and recording the garden birds from his classroom window

Creating an awareness of Biodiversity in the schools is one of the objectives of the Green Schools Flags. The Heritage Council is now responsible for operating the Heritage in Schools Scheme for which, creating awareness of Biodiversity is also part of their objectives. An obvious link therefore exists between the two schemes. As a Heritage Specialist I have been developing a Biodiversity Plan for some National Schools in County Limerick. This plan is attached and available for download. There is no one plan that suits every school for many reasons.

However parts of the plan should be adopted by every national school whether they are in the Green Schools or not.

Using garden birds to create awareness of Biodiversity in schools is by far the best method, if it is carried out using the guidelines below. You can show the pupils all the pictures, videos and toys that you want but you can't beat the real thing. Watching garden birds feeding from the classroom window is something that the children and teachers will get a lot of pleasure from. All the while, learning is taking place. Many people get personal satisfaction in feeding birds, knowing that you are helping the wildlife to survive during a difficult part of life cycle.

The results have been overwhelming at Milford national School in County Limerick. You can not avoid seeing the birds around the school. On one visit last year I was literally standing six feet away from a wild redpoll. It was feeding on peanuts from a feeder in the courtyard and there was no glass between myself and the bird. Many of the children and teachers now feed the birds in their own back garden. This is suitable for all classes including infants.

I have had many initial negative reactions from teachers at first saying that it was a health hazard, it will draw rats and mice, or that it is too expensive and time consuming. So far Milford National School has not found any of these concerns to be true.

Guidelines for attracting garden birds to your school.

1. Place the feeders on a pole positioned three feet from the classroom window or as near as possible. Use fence hooks for hanging the feeders.[See picture above]
2. The pole should be erected on grass or in a flower bed or raised bed. This will cover all the mess from the feeders. Do not place a feeder on concrete or tarmac etc.
3. There must be some cover for the birds to fly into when danger arrives. If there are no trees or shrubs, plant a weeping willow six feet away from the feeder. If the birds do not feel safe then they are not likely to use it.

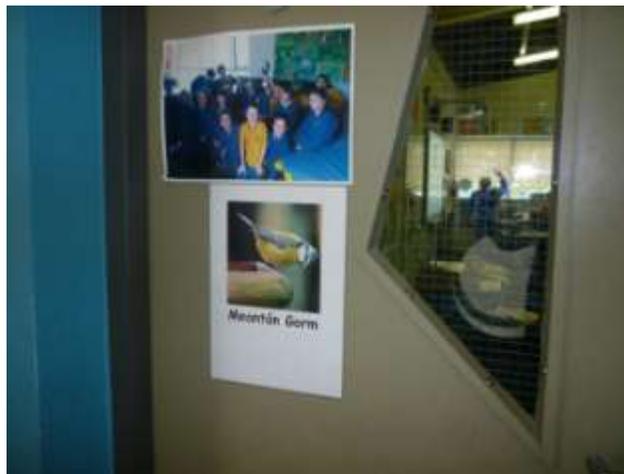
4. The types of feed that you can use include peanuts, wild bird seed, nyger, fat balls, apples and pears. Please use half eaten apples or pears. Put these into the fat ball holder or screw them onto a branch. There are different holders for the different feeds. The more variety of food you have the more variety of birds you will get. The more variety of birds will lead to a greater interest from the children. They will take more notice and will also learn more about garden birds
5. Feeders should be put up in December and taken down around 1st of March. Use up all food stock until it runs out otherwise it will go mouldy.
6. Put up posters of garden birds on the window or near it depending on the size of the window.
7. Allocate two children in the class each day to record which birds have been seen on that day and how many. Keep these records so that a comparison for each classroom, month or year can be made. Allocation of children can be as a reward for good behaviour as they will all want to do it. The recording should take place ten minutes before the morning and lunch breaks.
8. Invite a heritage specialist to the school to help with identification and to talk about garden birds in general. This can be very important as many teachers are not confident enough to be able to identify the birds.



Feeding from the hand takes a lot of patience



Recycled bird feeders, milk cartons and plastic bottles



Adopt a bird for the classroom door



Invite a Heritage Specialist to help with identification etc...