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Mealworms: A Sweet Treat for Backyard Birds

Special Report

It's prime time for bird-watching in Texas – but the season's cold snaps can mean trouble for our little winged friends, who often have a harder time getting sustenance in the winter.

The solution? Mealworms.

Small and round, mealworms are actually larval forms of the darkling beetle (*tenebrio molitor*) and are a favorite food of bluebirds and many other Texas birds. Installing a mealworm feeder in your backyard can be quite helpful to birds during the cold winter months, when insects are scarce. In the spring, they can even promote the growth of healthy nestlings - if a plentiful food supply is readily available, the female won't have to leave her eggs for very long.

The easiest way to care for mealworms is to store them in the refrigerator, inside a shallow container that allows air circulation (holes in the cover) so the mealworms can breathe. They will remain alive, in a dormant state. Add a few pieces of apple or banana peel about once a week to provide moisture.

When you're ready to feed them to your backyard birds, place several dozen in a container with slick sides, so they won't crawl away before the birds can find them. A glass custard dish on a ledge works, or even an implanted empty soup can, with both ends cut out.

Place the feeder a good ways from your house to begin with; as the birds become aware of the food source, you can bring the mealworms closer for better bird-watching, even to your window with an acrylic stick-on feeder, said Pauline Tom, a board member of the North American Bluebird Society.

"I toss mealworms directly onto the back porch, and wrens hop along the porch picking them up," Tom explained.

Those who feed mealworms to their birds deem them well worth the cost, since they allow close-up views of bird species that don't eat seed. And now, a new program from the North American Bluebird Society has made it even more cost-effective to feed with mealworms. Members of the society will receive a 15 percent discount on mealworms from two leading distributors. New members also receive an additional bonus when they sign up: a coupon for 1,000 free mealworms.

Individual memberships are just \$20, and family memberships are available for only \$30. In addition to the mealworm discount, members also receive a subscription to *Bluebird*, a quarterly journal with new scientific findings and a wealth of ideas and tips for bluebird lovers. To join, visit www.nabluebirdsociety.org, or send payment to NABS, P.O. Box 244, Wilmot, OH 44689-0244.

Founded in 1978, the North American Bluebird Society is a nonprofit organization dedicated to monitoring bluebird populations and leading the bluebird conservation movement.