

Spring Cleaning is for the BIRDS

No one likes coming home to a dirty house, including the birds! If you want to attract colorful birds to your yard during the spring migration, you'd better add their homes to your spring cleaning to-do list.

"An old nest in a bird box can have mites and parasites that are harmful to the birds," said Park Authority naturalist Tony Bulmer. "You should remove the old nest and debris and wash the bird box with dishwashing liquid and water only. Chemical products will repel the birds."

Once the bird houses are clean, Bulmer says you should sanitize your bird feeders with bleach or by running them through the dishwasher. Otherwise, you risk making the winged wonders sick.

"Bird seed often gets caked in the bottom of bird feeders, and if it's not cleaned out every few weeks, fungus and mold start growing in the seed, which will harm the birds if they eat it," Bulmer said. "Hummingbird feeders should be cleaned every three days to keep harmful black mold from growing in them."

Once the feeders are clean, you should carefully consider where to place them. A poorly placed feeder can also be hazardous to birds and attract unwanted guests to your house.

"Except for hummingbird feeders, I would avoid hanging bird feeders from the deck because you'll have to clean bird droppings from your deck daily, and the spilled seed can attract mice to your house," Bulmer said. "It's also important to hang feeders at least 10 feet from the house, because windows reflect the sky and confuse the birds. Instead of flying into the sky after feeding, they wind up flying into the window, which can injure them."

Bulmer says trees are among the best places to hang feeders because the branches and leaves provide cover from predators. Sunflower seeds will attract native birds like woodpeckers, chickadees and bluejays. "It's a good idea to have a source of water for native bluebirds," he said. "That will attract them more than anything."

If you have room for only one bird box in your yard, Bulmer suggests making it one built for native house wrens. These delightful birds are sure to entertain the entire family and keep other unwanted pests at bay.

"House wrens are charismatic, funny and sound like running water when they're singing," Bulmer said. "Kids love watching them and gardeners love having them around because they eat insects that are garden pests. Other birds love them because even though the house wren is only a few inches long, they're fearless and will chase crows away."

Turn to the Nature section for birding programs for children and adults. You can also ask a naturalist about birds and other natural wonders by submitting questions online at www.fairfaxcounty.gov/parks/ask-a-naturalist.



Wildflower Walks

The Perfect Cure for Cabin Fever

Spring is just around the corner and for just a few brief weeks, a spectrum of colorful wildflowers will blanket parkland trails, heralding warmer weather in one of the biggest biological events in the world. For each delicate species to survive to the next season, it must bloom, attract pollinators and go to seed before the trees begin to leaf and block out the sun. The race typically begins in late March and ends by mid-April in our area, and the breathtaking blooms are sure to wow you during your seasonal hikes along the trails.

Naturalist-led wildflower walks are a great way to learn about various plants, their heritage and their fascinating role in the ecosystem. Some seasonal varieties have delicate names, like pink lady slippers, fairy spuds and trout lilies. Several species depict their name, like the papoose flower, which wraps its leaves around the seed pod; Jack-in-the-pulpit features a tiny, upright flower spike that looks like a tiny man standing in an old-fashioned, raised pulpit. Perennial favorites include Dutchman's breeches, May apples and the Virginia bluebells. Nature makes them, and you can see them this spring in Fairfax County parks.



Celebrate the first signs of spring with a wildflower program or the Bluebells at the Bend Festival. For details, turn to the Nature and Events sections.