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Fun Times for Peeps of All Ages

John Johnston

On nearly every retailer visit I make, I check to see if the store has a wild bird display. Quite a few garden centers have outstanding departments with respectable selections of wild bird foods, nectars, suet and appropriate feeders. Since the big box explosion of home improvement stores, many independent garden centers have removed the birding category due to declining sales or uncertainty on how to compete. Some retailers explain they have difficulty in keeping critters from eating more bird seed than is sold to customers. If any of these challenges hit close to home for you, try rethinking your approach: A new look at this category could generate new interest and new sales this spring.

Universal Appeal

Data from the U.S. Department of the Interior, which protects our great outdoors, supports the expanding world of birding. It's the fastest-growing outdoor activity nationwide with more than 55 million people getting involved at every level, from novice to expert.

It's easy to understand the universal appeal: Birding is accessible everywhere in the country. Spotting and identifying birds is fascinating for all age groups. The price of admission is negligible; all that's needed is a good pair of binoculars and possibly a wild bird reference book to get started.

Unusual Sightings

In winters past, television stations were intrigued by sightings of the Snowy Owl along the Atlantic coastline, as far south as Delaware. This unusual occurrence of this arctic species raised awareness and drew travelers to see these magnificent creatures up close. Among the sightings, the birds made a cameo appearance on a casino awning in Atlantic City, New Jersey, to the delight of many.

Ornithologists researching the science behind migration patterns are also studying the impact of hurricanes on bird populations and their relocation. Last summer was a busy season for hurricanes, but it didn't stop "birders" across the country from counting bird species from Texas through the Carolina coastline.

Enjoying Sales without the Mess

Drawing unique birds into your garden doesn't have to require bird seed. Some spectacular species are drawn to other food sources. Hummingbirds, for example, are amazing creatures and their annual migratory journey will be starting soon.

Garden centers are finding that the newest glass hummingbird feeders are as beautiful as they are functional. Easy to fill and clean, these feeders are driving new sales opportunities everywhere. Hummingbird feeder manufacturers

like Perky Pet and Classic continue to be sold in retail stores of all sizes, but you do have a choice. Your store can provide unusual designs, higher quality and larger selections that aren't commonly found in discounters or box stores.

A Bird of a Different Color

If you live east of the Rocky Mountains, the Baltimore Oriole is one of the more colorful and interesting songbirds in America. It's drawn to fruit-bearing plants and enjoys an occasional sip of nectar from the hummingbird feeder. The male Oriole has a black head and sports a bright orange crest and underside with a white stripe through its black wings. The female has a duller brown crest. Many homeowners suspend fruit like an orange on a string to entice this little bird with its unmistakable soundtrack.

The month of March is the proper time to begin birdhouse installations around the yard and garden. Orioles prefer tall deciduous trees to make their nests using string or thin vines. As you plan and prepare to help your customers attract spring songbirds, make sure you're well stocked with these three things: food, water and protection! These are the keys to birding success at home and, wherever they're present, the chirping sounds of spring won't be far behind. **GP**

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Consider Sharing These Websites with Customers

www.audubon.org

www.birdwatchersdigest.com

www.allaboutbirds.org



Pictured: Closeable plastic containers like these, seen at Portland Nursery in Oregon, can help keep unwanted critters out of the bird food.