



By Renee Changnon, rchangnon@nrha.org

Bird Is the Word

Gather Your Own Flock in This Niche

Dorothy Martin's backyard is a songbird's paradise. If a cardinal or blue jay is thirsty in the winter, it can perch on a heated birdbath and dip its beak in. And no feathered visitor ever needs to leave the yard hungry, as Martin has a whole village of feeders full of the birds' favorite meals.

As the head of the lawn and garden department at Rocking R Hardware in Harrisonburg, Virginia, Martin is a resource her customers can turn to. She has been a bird enthusiast for more than 30 years.

No matter where you are in the country or what your customer demographics may be, you likely have customers who enjoy bird-related activities, too.

Whether customers are casual about their interest or consider themselves serious birders, the niche can be successful in nearly any market.

In this article, *Hardware Retailing* will explore the products, knowledge and relationships you can build to make the birding niche a successful part of your business. Success is achieved through a broad mix of supplies, including feed, birdhouses and birdbaths; knowledgeable employees; and fostering connections with birding organizations, such as your local chapter of the National Audubon Society. Read how Rocking R Hardware, Ace Hardware of Toco Hills and Plain Hardware have each taken flight in the birding niche in their communities.

Putting the Call Out

Whether you already have a designated area for birding products in your store, finding the right products and displaying them in a memorable way can help spread the word about the department to other birding enthusiasts.

In the six years since Tom Pate became owner of Ace Hardware of Toco Hills in Atlanta, he has seen the birding niche become one of the best performing departments in his store, based on sheer volume of sales and high margins.

"I've expanded the department since I took ownership of the store as sales were continuing to increase," Pate says. "We've tried to create a bird-watching haven in our bird aisle. Birdhouses and feeders hang in the aisle, and we have a sound machine that plays bird songs in the background, adding to the ambiance."

At Rocking R Hardware, the business now is home to two 30-foot sections of bird products, including feeders, houses and food.

The store sells a wide variety of bird products, but the most profitable and important to consider is stocking a wide variety of bird food, Pate says.

"Birding products, especially bird food, are very easy to sell," Pate says. "You can get started without needing a deep knowledge base of the hobby. Plus, birding gets customers in every month, if not every few weeks, to replenish bird food."

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Some of the most innovative products in the category that Martin sells include bird feeders that detect the weight of larger animals, like squirrels attempting to eat from the feeder, as well as heated birdbaths for cold winter months.

"More customers are interested in buying heated birdbaths," Martin says. "These birdbaths keep birds hydrated in the winter, which is very important, because water is much harder to come by in extremely cold climates."

In Plain, Washington, home of Plain Hardware, there are many homeowners and gardeners who enjoy creating bird-friendly habitats, says Rob Whitten, owner of the store.



Customers at **Rocking R Hardware** in Harrisonburg, Virginia, are easily drawn to the birding department. In addition to utilizing large signage and stack outs for bird seed and other related products, it even has a musical track with bird songs playing in the background.

“We offer bird-feeders and food,” Whitten says. “We also carry plants that attract birds. Landscaping with this in mind creates an environment conducive to birds.”

And although birding has a reputation as a pastime mostly popular among older generations, Pate says his store serves a wide customer demographic.

Education Leads to Sales

Many customers want to be specific about the birds they attract.

Martin suggests doing some research on what birds customers might be looking for and the food they prefer.

“There are so many different types of birds to look for, and it’s fun to see what you can attract based on the food you put in your feeder.”

—Tom Pate, Ace Hardware of Toco Hills

“I have been bird-watching for many years, and I use many of the products we sell at my own home, so it makes it easier to share my knowledge and experiences with our customers when they’re trying to find the right feeder or food to attract specific birds,” Martin says.

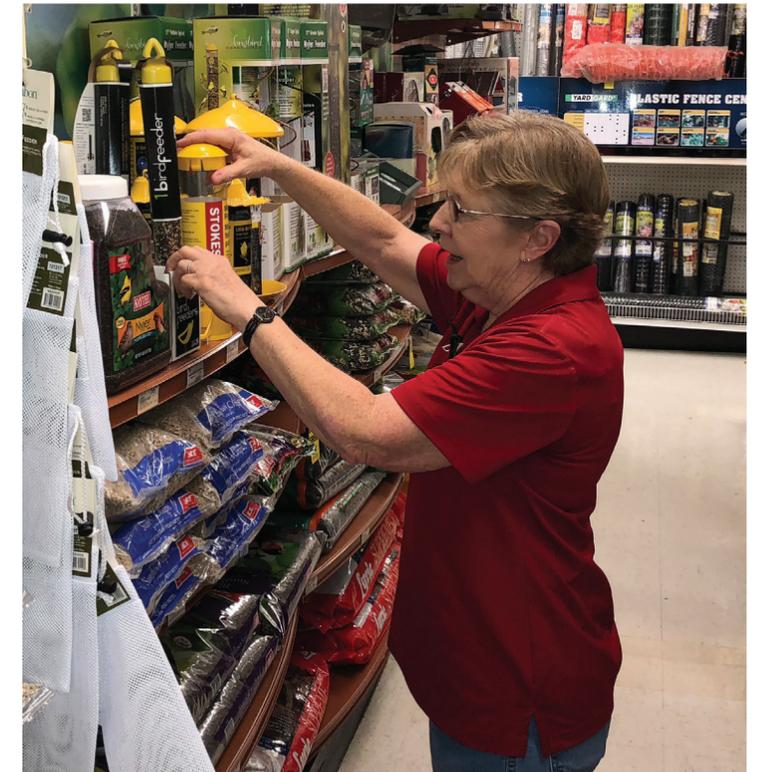
“It’s very important to research and look up the regional birds in your area.”

For example, Rocking R Hardware sells a book that categorizes the birds of the state of Virginia by color. If Martin isn’t sure what type of bird a customer is trying to describe, she can look for a specific color and help them identify the type of bird, what it eats and what habitat it prefers.

Pate says having an interest in the hobby and trying products at home has established himself and his employees as helpful resources for customers.

“There are so many different types of birds to look for, and it’s fun to see what you can attract based on the food you put in your feeder,” Pate says. “At home, I have birdhouses, birdfeeders and a birdbath set up around the yard. If you understand the hobby and can share what has worked for you, your customers will be able to trust your advice when shopping.”

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Left: Plain Hardware carries traditional birding items, along with themed gift items, like this puzzle of state birds and flowers in Washington. **Right:** Dorothy Martin, head of the lawn and garden department at Rocking R Hardware and an avid birder, is a resource for her customers.

4 Ways to Create and Establish a Backyard Bird Paradise



Eastern bluebird perched on the Eastern redbud tree.
Photo by Glenda Simmons

The birding niche is one that attracts consumers from a variety of backgrounds. To best help birders create their own outdoor paradise for wild birds, there are a variety of ways homeowners can encourage more birds to fly by for a visit.

Hardware Retailing spoke with John Rowden, director of community conservation for the National Audubon Society, to gain insights on keeping winged visitors happy and healthy. Review these four ways a birder can make their yards bird-friendly, according to the National Audubon Society.

- 1. Incorporate a variety of native plants.** Native plants are one of the first things a consumer should consider when creating an outdoor oasis for birds. According to Rowden, native plants provide a variety of bird food throughout the year for nesting, migrating and wintering birds. Retailers can help their customers by suggesting the native plants to add to the yard. The plants and trees a customer adds can offer plenty of food for birds, including insects, fruit, nuts and seeds and nectar. To learn about specific native plants in your area, the National Audubon Society has a native plant database at audubon.org/native-plants that provides all the information you or your customer needs.
- 2. Create a bird habitat.** The at-home bird-watcher is creating a habitat to provide food, shelter and nesting sites all year. Homeowners should map out a plan for where certain plants should be and consider the traits of the space. Is it sunny, shady or both? Is it dry or wet? What kind of soil is there? Rowden recommends having a variety of layers of plants, from canopy trees providing nuts,

nest cavities and roosting spots to shrubs and small trees that provide fruit and nesting sites for songbirds. Decaying leaves and other items that would be composted are also something homeowners should provide, as they supply birds with food. Consider setting up birdbaths and including a fountain feature as well, as the sound of running water may bring them flocking.

- 3. Prepare and plant in the garden.** Before a homeowner adds native plants to the yard, they'll want to be sure to remove turf grass or invasive plants. Native plants don't respond as well to fertilizer. However, enriching the soil with organic compost is a good idea. Watering newly planted native plants is something that will help establish them as they mature.
- 4. Care for and maintain a bird-friendly space.** To keep the yard a safe space for birds, homeowners should clear non-native and invasive weeds. They should also avoid raking too much away, as leaves and debris serve as natural mulch, which creates a habitat for insects, which birds eat. Avoid pesticides, the National Audubon Society says, as "a bird-friendly garden is also a bug-friendly garden." Composting is another way you can help out the birds. It improves soil health and reduces waste. Compost byproducts redistribute nutrients back into the soil. The benefits of soil include regulating pH balance, improving the soil texture and encouraging microbes. Healthier soil creates healthier plants and eliminates the need for fertilizer. Composting also promotes the growth of insects and worms, which really helps the birds. For more about the benefits of composting, visit TheRedT.com/composting-faq.

Another resource you can utilize to educate yourself is the National Audubon Society. The organization protects birds and the outdoor spaces they rely on now and in the future, says John Rowden, the National Audubon Society's director of community conservation. The nonprofit conservation organization has state programs, nature centers, local chapters and can be a great resource for partnerships.

"Retailers and independent stores should reach out to their local Audubon chapter or center for information on the local birds to ensure their staff is educated on popular bird species in the area," Rowden says. "Business owners can also ask if an Audubon member would be willing to come in and speak about Audubon's 'Plants for Birds' program to educate employees or customers on how they can create a bird-friendly habitat at home."

Rowden also suggests retailers focus on selling native plants and provide a combination of both bird-specific products and lawn and garden products. In addition to offering native plants, he suggests offering bird seeds that are nutritionally complete without added fatty ingredients.



To grow an audience of repeat birding shoppers, display a variety of bird foods, houses and feeders for visual impact.

“We have had an event with live owls as well as birds of prey, like eagles and hawks. Those events draw 100 people or more, spreading the word about our business and helping our customers associate us with the niche.”

—Dorothy Martin, *Rocking R Hardware*

Bringing Bird Lovers Together

To help reinforce your reputation as a place with a strong birding niche, you should also consider hosting events for customers who are bird enthusiasts.

Rocking R Hardware has hosted events to draw bird lovers into the store. The store's most popular events included partnering with a local wildlife center to show living wild birds, Martin says.

"We have had an event with live owls as well as birds of prey, like eagles and hawks," she says. "Those events draw 100 people or more, spreading the word about our business and helping our customers associate us with the niche. We've done seminars on other wild birds that haven't been as popular, but I think in our case, having an actual bird on hand is what gets people excited and more likely to attend."

Plain Hardware also hosts events to help build connections within its community, says Whitten.

"In addition to offering the products and materials a customer will need to attract birds, we encourage our customers to learn through educational events by providing access to local experts and enthusiasts," Whitten says.

Recently, the store partnered with a biologist, naturalist and educator from the area, Susan Ballinger, to take a group on a day trip to learn about birds and how to identify them in the field.

For the bird-watching outing, Ballinger brought several items to share with attendees that you might consider if you host a similar event.

Ballinger brought special shirts that protect people from mosquitoes, as well as extra binoculars and books to help attendees identify types of birds they might see.

The attendees started at the store and visited a few popular riverside bird-watching spots. As an expert birder, Ballinger was able to offer event attendees insight on how to be a more knowledgeable, serious hobbyist.

To learn more about the bird-watching event that was hosted by Plain Hardware and led by Susan Ballinger, visit TheRedT.com/ballinger-birds.

In the article, Ballinger shares advice from the perspective of a serious birder and discusses what items a store should carry if they want to attract bird-enthusiasts like herself.

“Aside from making the yard wildlife- and bird-friendly, we encourage our customers to learn something new through our educational events,” Whitten says. “We try to help make connections for our customers.”

According to Whitten, his focus within the birding niche is to offer useful knowledge and education, the products and materials a customer needs, and access to local enthusiasts and experts through events.

“We are passionate about connecting people,” Whitten says. “Through our efforts, we can bring groups of people together who have similar interests. I think our customers appreciate that and return to us with their stories.” ➔



Plain Hardware offers many unique bird-themed items, like this decorative birdseed container.



Plain Hardware sells cards from a local artist, Heather Murphy, who does field drawings and watercolors from her time spent birding. The cards provide detailed visuals of a variety of bird species, as well as educational notes. Learn more about her artwork at wildtales.com.