

Birds of Prey and the Backyard Food Chain

Birds of Prey

While bird feeders attract a variety of welcomed birds, these smaller birds are food for larger birds of prey, called raptors. Raptors are meat eaters with exceptional vision; powerful feet with curved, sharp talons; and a hooked beak.

Some common raptors, like the red-tailed hawk, great horned owl, sharp shinned hawks and cooper's hawk reside throughout the US and thrive in woods, cities, and suburbs they hunt and eat birds visiting feeders, and may even set up a nest in a nearby tree for easy access to the feeding birds. In the spring and summer, when raptors are feeding their young, birds visiting feeders are often hard hit by them.

Raptors also eat small mammals, including the mice, rats, chipmunks, squirrels, opossums, skunks, raccoons, and more that are attracted to and also feed from the bird feeder, or the seed that spills to the ground below. In turn, these small mammals can attract larger predators like red foxes, coyotes, and even bears. When you set up a bird feeder, you set up a food chain that may include a wide range of predators and scavengers!

A Threat to Cats and Small Dogs

Although rare, raptors have been known to attack, injure, and kill cats and small dogs, even when a pet is leashed and accompanied by a person. As humans continue to encroach on wild animals' habitat, these animals grow more accustomed to our presence and comfortable entering our yards.

The bottom line: this is one more reason to never let your cat outdoors unattended, even in limited areas like a deck or fenced yard that may seem secure, especially if you have a bird feeder. A cat on a deck or in an open yard can be a clear target for a raptor hunting for a meal.

Pay attention to sounds - and the lack of them - when you're outside with your cat. If the wonderful chirping of birds suddenly stops or birds suddenly fly away from the feeder for no apparent reason, it might mean that a raptor is circling overhead or has silently perched in a nearby tree.

Raptors typically glide silently overhead and may spot prey on the ground from as high as 5,000 feet above before swooping down to grasp it with their feet and talons, which alone can do great damage and even kill. Then, they either hold their prey on the ground and eat it, or, if it's light enough, can carry it in their talons or bill to a tree or other high perch to finish their meal.

Some raptors, like the widespread great horned owl, are extremely powerful and true threats to cats and small dogs. Great horned owls hunt at dusk and by night. Their prey can include domestic cats.

Can a Raptor Fly Off with a Cat or Small Dog?

In general, most common raptors weigh two or three pounds and hunt small mammals like squirrels. They typically can't fly off with more than three or four pounds in their talons, but there are exceptions.

General consensus is that if a raptor were to pick up a cat or small dog it would only be able to lift it a few feet off the ground and can carry it for a few feet before dropping it.

Tips for Feeding Birds

The safest way for your cat to enjoy the activity of a bird feeder is from indoors or a screened-in porch. If you have a feeder and allow your cat outdoors, you can reduce the chance of attracting raptors to your feeder - and your cat:

- Consider only feeding birds in the late fall through early spring, when natural food is scarce. Raptors scout bird feeders in late spring and summer, when they are hunting for food for their young.

Remember, raptors are also attracted to the small mammals that scavenge off your feeder. These animals can also carry rabies and other diseases that may harm your cat. To reduce the risk of attracting these animals:

- Use squirrel-proof feeders.
- Place feeders where they will not attract other animals.
- Avoid bird seed that contains nuts. Nuts that spill to the ground attract squirrels, rats, and other rodents.
- Clean up any seed that spills to the ground before nightfall so opossums and other nocturnal mammals don't regularly visit after dark. Many will build a nest near a steady supply of bird seed.
- Consider securely sealing your bird feeder in a plastic bag and bringing it indoors at night.
- Don't leave bags of bird seed outdoors or in sheds.
- If you feed feral cats or pets outdoors, remove all food, water, and sources of shelter before nightfall.
- Turn off outdoor lights. Lights attract insects, which in turn attract additional prey like bats, frogs, toads, and the predators that eat them.

Raptors are magnificent birds. They are an important part of the ecosystems to which they belong and provide rodent control in urban ecosystems. As more wild animals are displaced by overdevelopment and human activities, it's important that we learn to peacefully coexist with them - and protect our pets at the same time.

Resources:

ShowCatsOnline.com

Peregrine Fund

