

# Ask Maine Audubon: How do you keep mosquitoes out of a bird bath?

Your wildlife questions are answered by Maine Audubon Staff Naturalist Doug Hitchcox.

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Make sure that the water in your bird bath isn't too deep, only an inch or two, so that the birds have a safe place to perch while bathing. *Steffen Schmidt/Associated Press*

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Of the three essentials for birds' survival – food, water and shelter – water is the one consistent thing that all birds need, so it has the potential to attract a great variety of birds to your yard.

So after providing food via feeders, one of the next best ways to attract birds to your yard is with a bird bath. However, much like the need to maintain feeders and houses, there are also many responsibilities that come with providing water via a bath.

The bath should be what the birds need. Do your best to replicate the kind of water birds would find in nature; think puddle or stream. Make sure that the water isn't too deep, only an inch or two, so that the

birds have a safe place to perch while bathing. Also, keeping the water moving with a drip or pump can be a good way to attract birds and help keep pests away.

Speaking of pests, the impetus for this column came from a question sent in by Jennifer Morris of South Portland asking how to deal with mosquitoes that were developing in her bird bath. Jennifer was specifically questioning some of the products on the market that can help reduce mosquito populations. Without targeting certain brands, I recommend that you always research the active ingredients in any product that you consider using.

Many of the organic pesticides we see on the market are strains of “Bt” or *Bacillus thuringiensis*. Bt is a species of bacteria that is a naturally occurring pesticide, rather than synthetic (man-made), so it gets the label “organic.” Most pesticides will not be specific to just the target pest, and there are subspecies of Bt that are known to target specific families of insects. Bt *kurstaki* is the strain commonly used in browntail moth spraying, while Bt *israelensis* (Bti) targets diptera larva, like mosquitoes, gnats and black flies.

While these targeted products are available, my personal recommendation is that you take the extra time to maintain your bird baths rather than use any pesticides. Birds need insects, including mosquitoes and black flies, to feed their young. It is the abundance

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of those insects that propels birds to take multi-thousand-mile migrations to get to Maine each summer, where there will be enough food for them to breed. Instead of dumping pesticides into a bird bath, I would recommend cleaning it out every couple of days. The life cycle of a mosquito, from egg to adult, takes about 8 to 10 days, so taking a hose to your bird bath and replacing the water every couple of days will keep it clean and at least reduce the mosquitoes in your yard.

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## NESTS ARE FOR NESTING

Many of the questions we get at Maine Audubon this time of year are about birds nesting near a dwelling, on lawn furniture, under a boat trailer, and the like – and what can be done about it. A few important things to remember: it is illegal to destroy a nest; and for most of the small songbirds nesting near our houses or structures, their nesting cycle is only going to take a couple or few weeks. A house finch nesting on the

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wreath you forgot to take off your front door may seem like an inconvenience to you as you leave the house, but it is a short-term annoyance that is worth dealing with until those birds can fledge their young.

The two bits of advice I give are both around timing: either stop them before they start, or dissuade them before they can start again.

Most birds take several days or a week to build a nest before laying any eggs. If you notice birds starting to build a nest in an area that is going to be “bad” for you (we hear of a lot of birds nesting on boats before they get taken out for the summer) then step in early and remove the material or put something in the way of that spot to make it less appealing.

If you’ve missed that window, and you do find a nest, then you are in for that aforementioned short-term inconvenience. Remember, it is illegal to destroy the nest, so just give the birds the few weeks they need. Using an American robin as an example, they take just under two weeks (12-13 days) to incubate their eggs, then fledge within another two weeks (9-16 days).

Some of you have asked about the second piece of that advice: “dissuade them before they can start again.” Once a first brood has fledged, it is OK to take down the nest or find some way to keep the bird from returning to that spot and nesting again.

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Keep in mind the nest is just a safe place to keep eggs from rolling out; otherwise, it is a dangerous place for vulnerable babies (in terms of predators). So once the chicks have fledged, they rarely return. Adults, though, may return and attempt a second brood, so this is your window of opportunity for encouraging them to find a new spot.

*Do you have a nature question for Doug? Email questions to [ask@maineaudubon.org](mailto:ask@maineaudubon.org) and visit [maineaudubon.org](http://maineaudubon.org) to learn more about birding, native plants, and programs and events focusing on Maine wildlife and habitat. Doug and other naturalists lead free bird walks on Thursday mornings, 7 to 9 a.m., at the Gilsland Farm Audubon Sanctuary in Falmouth.*

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