

Should I offer backyard honeyeaters food?

Offering backyard honeyeaters food is not recommended.

We are fortunate to have several species of honeyeater frequently visiting our gardens in Perth. These include the small brown honeyeaters, the larger New Holland and Singing Honeyeaters and the Red Wattlebird, which is the largest honeyeater in Perth.² It is often tempting to provide food for these birds to encourage them to visit more often. However, feeding human food can lead to **nutritional imbalances**, increase the risk of **disease** and lead to a disruption in natural **animal behaviour**.

Nutritional imbalances

Human food is not natural for honeyeaters and can make them **sick**. A natural diet for these birds consists of **nectar and pollen from native flowers and insects**.¹ Food sources commonly offered to honeyeaters are sugary water, honey and jams, however these foods can lead to **nutritional imbalances** and **life threatening complications**. Honeyeaters may become dependent on these sugary foods and reduce their intake of natural food such as insects. A high sugar diet can be just as damaging to these birds as it is to humans.

These birds are also considerably smaller than humans so the amount of food supplied is often **in excess** of the required **daily intake** for these animals.





Spread of disease

Feeding stations can attract numerous birds to the same area on a regular basis. Multiple birds eating and defecating in these small areas can greatly increase the risk of disease transmission.

Disrupting animal behaviour

A constant supply of 'easy' human food can disrupt the natural population density within an area. The larger Red Wattlebirds may out-compete many of the smaller honeyeaters for food and effectively force them out of the area.

What can I do instead to help honeyeaters living in my garden?

There are plenty of things you can do to encourage honeyeaters in your garden **without the risk of causing harm**.

- Ensure birds are **safe from pets** on your property.
 - Keep cats indoors, or contained within an outdoor enclosure.
- **Avoid using plant and insect poisons**, which can be fatal to birds – either by eating the poison, or by eating poisoned bugs. Additionally, killing insects will remove a food source for these birds.
- Plant plenty of **native flowering shrubs** local to your area. Banksia, Grevillea and Callistemon are often favoured by nectar-feeding birds, but check with your nursery for appropriate local plants.

Feeding honeyeaters is not recommended. However, if you must feed them you should aim to minimise the risk of harm:

- Completely avoid unhealthy (and potentially life-threatening) foodstuffs such as **bread (and other baked goods) and artificial sugary mixes such as honey, jam, and sugar water**.



Bread

Jam

- Offer **very small portions** of safer foods, and **not everyday**.
 - **Provide good quality commercial nectar mixes.**
- Offer food in ways that minimises the risk of harm.
 - Offer food at high locations, to **avoid predation** by cats and foxes.
 - Ensure the feeding station is routinely cleaned to prevent the **spread of disease**.

Sources:

¹ Nagy, K.A., Girard, I.A., Brown, T.K. 1999. Energetics of free-ranging mammals, reptiles and birds. *Ann. Rev. Nutr.* 19: 247-277

² <http://www.birdsinbackyards.net/birds/featured/Honeyeaters>