

BIRDS! BIRDS! BIRDS!

And all for a little water!

by UCCE Tuolumne County
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Do you like **watching birds**? I certainly do. Before I really started looking I saw only a few different species. And I don't have hours to spend hiding quietly, waiting. So of course I started feeding the birds. This attracts some birds, but not all. The thing **they all need is water**.

You see many "birdbaths" around with nary a bird in sight. Why? Let's look from the birds' point of view. Many of these are more fountain-like in form. The edges are thick and offer no easy perch. A pool several feet up may not be comfortable for ground birds. Constant sun can heat the water to unpleasant temperatures and ultimate evaporation.

So what looks good? Most average size birds are comfortable on branches the size of a pencil. They love to get into the water and splash around, but they need to know how deep it is. Nearby perches, from which they can check for cats and on which they can land after bathing in order to preen their feathers, are beneficial.

To provide water for birds, first decide the type of water, running or standing. Running, whether constant or occasional, is preferred. The sound of running water attracts their attention, signaling clean refreshment. Running water can be either a fountain recycling the same water, or a flow-through requiring a fresh water source and planned drainage. Standing water is, of course, the easiest. Thirsty birds will find the standing water and, if it's safe and easy, they will be there often. Just put out a saucer, pan or tub filled to the brim. Small birds have limited reach. If it's deep make sure to lean a perching rod of some kind down into the water. Take care what kind of brim the container has. A rolled out edge is more difficult for the bird's feet to grab than a straight-up edge like a trash can lid. The thinner the better.

Another easy option you might choose is to have a **small waterfall sculpture** on your deck, recycling the same water. This will attract small birds like titmice, nuthatches and goldfinches. Again give the birds good landing zones. Watch for a while to see if it's used. If not, try adding perches, or put pebbles down so they can see the bottom.

Mine is on the ground and fed by the soaker hose when I irrigate. The overflow runs into my flower garden. This way, **mosquito larvae are kept to a minimum**, getting rinsed out daily. Although the ground doesn't offer safety, I made sure the **view is 360°**. There are low branches and a lattice fence, which offer some **escape routes**. A small washtub, a plant saucer and the top of a broken trash can make up my birdbath/waterfall. I have plans to rework it in rock for a natural look, but the birds seem quite content with cast-off construction.

There are a couple of branches across the tub, because it is deep. Leaning a branch from the bottom to the edge allows a bird to step down easily into the water without fear. (I actually rescued a young bird from drowning. It panicked and couldn't get its wingtips out of the water, even though the branch was right there.)

If you want to watch the birds actually bathing this setup is your best bet. From titmice to towhee, about **two to three inches of water seems ideal**. The 14" plant saucer is the favorite of

the titmice, while the robins and towhees enjoy the depth of the lid tilted between the other two vessels. They get so wet they look like ducks!

Year round I enjoy the company of bushtits, titmice, white-breasted nuthatches, brown towhees, spotted towhees, mourning doves, black-headed grosbeaks, and purple finches. My winter residents are white-, golden-, and Rufous-crowned sparrows, hermit thrushes, Oregon juncos, and cowbirds. Summer brings American goldfinches and lesser goldfinches (Green-backed), American robins, Anna's hummingbirds, and black phoebes. Occasional visitors are Bullock's Orioles, green-tailed towhees, wren-tit's, lazuli buntings, western tanagers, Hutton's vireos, western flycatchers ...and all for a little water.

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