

# Fresh Success



Tropical fruits  
lure varied  
species into  
better view.

by Mike Hannisian

**O**ur grandparents might have set up backyard seed feeders to attract birds during cooler months when birds were more visible. Later, our parents started adding water to their feeding set-ups and kept it available during winter, attracting even more birds. More recently, our year-round offerings include suet and peanut butter mixes, sugar-water and grape jam.

Some birders might think that we have discovered all there is to know about attracting birds. We are a creative species,

however — always looking to outdo prior generations, especially if improvements are simple, inexpensive and really effective.

An example of an improvement came to my attention one spring day when I arrived at the convention center on South Padre Island in Texas' lower Rio Grande Valley. A migrant trap, the area around the center offers the first haven for migrants after 10, 20 or more hours flying over the open Gulf of Mexico. The arriving migrants desperately need food, water and shelter.

At the convention center, someone had

improved the birds' food selection, and it was hard to tell whether the birds or the birders appreciated it more. Someone had placed red grapefruit and orange halves among the trees, and the birds were jostling each other to get at them.

Among my favorites that day were an adult male Baltimore Oriole eating an orange placed on a branch of a sea grape; a breeding-plumaged male Scarlet Tanager eating a red grapefruit, replaced by a changing male Summer Tanager; an adult Tennessee Warbler eating another



Even farther inland, the increasingly difficult-to-find Brown Jay likes oranges.



grapefruit; and a male Nashville Warbler eating from an orange half.

None of these species naturally eat citrus on the breeding grounds, and such fruit isn't always available during migration. Why were they so readily devouring these offerings? Citrus provides both food and water.

Anyone who has eaten a regular grapefruit knows that it can be quite sour, but current varieties, such as Ruby Red and Rio Red, contain higher amounts of natural sugars and taste quite sweet. Wild oranges also can be as sour as lemons, but many varieties of sweet oranges have been developed. The birds need the sugars to quickly restore their spent energy reserves, and the fruits' juiciness offers a fine source of water.

Such fruit is just as popular inland at the Frontera Audubon Society property in Weslaco, Texas. This 16-acre, privately owned, urban/suburban park regularly uses citrus to attract birds throughout the

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winter in addition to its seed feeders. In fact, the easiest place to see Crimson-colored Grosbeaks during their invasion a few years ago was the fruit feeders.

Citrus is not the only tropical fruit that attracts birds. While the lower Rio Grande Valley is well noted for its high frequency of rare birds, one man has developed a reputation for attracting rarities to his yard. In his 2½ acres in suburban Pharr, Allen Williams has hosted Blue Mockingbird, Crimson-collared Grosbeak, White-throated Thrush and Orange-billed Nightingale-Thrush. These are in addition to local birds — such as Black-crested Titmouse, Golden-fronted Woodpecker, Olive Sparrow, Plain Chachalaca, Great

Kiskadee and Green Jay — and migrants such as Wood, Swainson's and Gray-checked Thrushes; Gray Catbird, Painted and Indigo Buntings; and Common Yellowthroats.

Williams owns a landscape design-installation business that promotes the use of native plants and trees in residential, commercial, and park landscapes. He has worked hard to determine the best ways to attract wildlife to public and private properties of all sizes. Williams recently said he uses almost exclusively fruit and water to lure birds to his and clients' sites. He has found two more tropical fruits that birds seem to prefer: papaya and banana.

In fact, on a visit last summer, I observed a group of Plain Chachalacas and a Great Kiskadee eating small pieces of banana placed on a horizontal branch. Williams had found that a number of species find small pieces of even very ripe — that is, completely brown — bananas almost irresistible. The caveat is that birds





are not good at peeling bananas, so he slices and places them on any fairly flat surface.

The tropical fruit that the birds seem to prefer above all others, Williams said, is papaya. In south Texas, this is a common fruit in the local supermarkets but might not be everywhere. He cuts the fruit into chunks of varying sizes and places them throughout his trees. He does this by either placing them on small twigs or on a medium-sized nail hammered into a branch or other structure.

One of the convenient aspects of offering tropical fruit is that elaborate feeders are not needed. You can, though, find fruit feeders on the market, and most of them work very nicely.

Perhaps the most fascinating part is the proof that we are far from discovering the last technique in attracting birds. Give tropical fruit a try, and see what else you can come up with that might be the next rage in attracting birds. **WB**

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