



GREAT BIRDING PROJECTS



An approach to bird-related editing, education, tourism, and marketing

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Is Hemp the Birdseed of the Future?



Perhaps. But, actually it's also the birdseed of the past.

In the winter of 1895-96, bird-feeding pioneer, Elizabeth B. Davenport of Brattleboro, Vermont, fed the birds at her window a unique high-oil seed: hemp. Full of fat, protein, and carbohydrates, hemp seed was widely available at the time at feed and grain stores. It was quickly adopted by early wild bird feeding proponents, and it became a main ingredient in their birdseed mixes.

Yes, hemp, *Cannabis sativa*, is also used as a recreational or medical drug, marijuana. Of course, there are huge differences between "industrial hemp" or "psychoactive hemp."

Still, by the 'teens of the last century, hemp had become a standard of bird feeding. "Hemp seed and Japanese millet are among the best seeds to offer the birds in winter," wrote Ernest Harold Baynes in *Wild Bird Guests* (1915). In *The Bird Study Book* (1917), T. Gilbert Pearson, president of the National Association of Audubon Societies, advocated using hemp seed, as well as cracked corn, wheat, rice, and sunflower seeds since they all could be "purchased readily in any town."

Of high nutritional value and easily acquired, hemp was simple to grow, too. A "Plant for the Birds" campaign by the Massachusetts Audubon Society in May 1917 included this advice: "Hemp is... easily raised in the ordinary backyard garden. It grows five or six feet tall in good soil, its fern-like foliage and graceful shape making it rather ornamental. The flowers are greenish plummy tufts at the branch tips. The seeds are numerous and much loved by birds."

And the praise went on for years. Discussing "satisfactory foods" for wild birds in the 1941 book, *Audubon Guide to Attracting Birds*, Roger Tory Peterson called hemp, a favorite with seed-eaters: "In a mixture of cracked corn and smaller seeds, hemp always goes first."

The problem was that a variety of hemp could be psychoactive, and that form was easily confused with industrial hemp. The passage of the federal Marijuana Tax Act in 1937 complicated things. And except for the short-lived USDA-promoted [Hemp for Victory](#) campaign of WWII - to provide cordage, rope, and cloth for the war effort - hemp slipped away as a birdseed of consequence in the U.S. The Controlled Substances Act of 1970

didn't make things any easier.

Currently it is popular to categorize hemp as either "industrial hemp" or "psychoactive hemp," (the popular marijuana of today's media). Some strains of the plant can have almost none of the psychoactive chemical; others may possess an abundance of it. Industrial hemp usually has less than 0.3 to 1.0 percent THC (delta-9 tetrahydrocannabinol).

Organized business groups and even state and federal agencies and lawmakers are considering ways to revive industrial hemp production in the U.S. There are also some sections of the most recent Farm Bill that make hemp exploration - even including bird seed use - possible. But the use of hemp as birdseed still has a way to go.

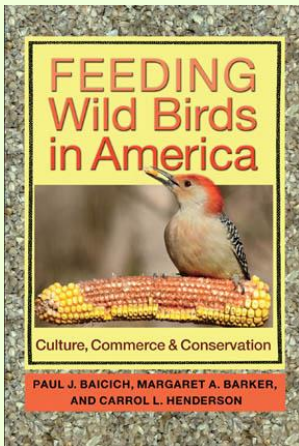
Today, Canada is the main supplier of hemp products to this country, with China and eastern European countries also in the mix.

The whole story is told in [Wild Bird Feeding in America: Culture, Commerce, and Conservation](#). (See more details, below.)

Frankly, it's not that hemp fell out of favor with birds or with the bird-feeding public, but confusion and misunderstanding in the 20th century made it scarce in the marketplace. In his mid-1970s book, *A Complete Guide to Bird Feeding*, John Dennis mourned that hemp was no longer easy to find: "This is too bad, for hemp had all the virtues of sunflower and far less of the seed was taken up by hull."

Of course, the plant can still be found growing wild in ditches and odd corners of farms, surviving from World War II-era plantings. Hemp might still be destined to become the birdseed of the future, and millions of Americans who feed wild birds may once again be able to visit local stores to pick up bags of hemp seed marked "grown in the USA."

The Story of Backyard Bird Feeding



Depending on the time and place, the seemingly simple practice of bird feeding in America has been many things over the last 120 years. It has been a social cause, a trendy curiosity, an agricultural obligation, a serious hobby, a billion-dollar industry, a basis for scientific study, a pathway to conservation, and pure entertainment.

The whole story is describe in *Feeding Wild Birds in America: Culture, Commerce, and Conservation* (Texas A & M University Press), written by Paul J. Baicich, Margaret A. Barker, and Carrol L. Henderson. The book covers our pioneer bird-protection foremothers, the do-it-yourself origins of early feeding, the devices and appliances invented in the roaring '20s, hard times and bird feeding in the Depression, war rationing and

feeding during WWII, the post-war suburban growth and the parallel role of feeding in the backyard, the experimentation with new seeds and products, the rise of all-year feeding, and 21st century experiences.

The multi-decade story of bird feeding is one of innovation and a reflection of changing times in America, but it is also a story of how we Americans have come to value the natural world. This is a story that has never been presented in book-form until now.

This new book puts *bird feeding in context*, and it tells an important tale.

It also concludes with valuable insights concerning rarities at the feeder, feeding across the Americas, and the cumulative lessons of 120 years of bird feeding, the 10 key foods and 5 essential practices for feeding success.

If you wish more details - including comments from early readers - if you want to order quantities of the book, or if you want individual copies, see [Texas A&M University Press](#). You can also order individual copies from other online sellers, such as [Buteo Books](#), [Bird Watcher's Nature Shop](#) (where you can also get a free autographed book-plate), or from [Amazon](#). The book can increasingly be found at many bookstores across the country, including bird-specialty stores and nature-centers.

One particularly insightful review of the book appeared a couple of months ago in the Wildlife Management Institute's monthly *Outdoor News Bulletin*. Written by Jodi A. Stemler, you can access it [here](#).

The authors are very much looking for ifeedback and assistance in some related brainstorming. This is very much an American story of how we in this country interact with nature close to us. And the story needs to be appreciated. Please consider the requests below, and understand that your opinions are certainly appreciated.

Three requests from the three co-authors:

- 1) Stores/Reviews:** If you have some ideas about stores (and on-line shops) where the book might be sold, or magazines (and popular blogs) where the book should be reviewed, please consider contacting Paul J. Baicich (paul.baicich@verizon.net).
- 2) Talks:** If you are aware of places where an author can be invited for a book-signing session, or meetings/festivals where one or more of the authors might be invited to give presentations, please inform Margaret A. Barker (mab27@cornell.edu).
- 3) Artwork:** If you have a need for some related artwork from the book (e.g., for a review or blog), please contact Carrol L. Henderson (carrollhenderson@prodigy.net).

Words to Consider:

"In the course of the winter I threw out half a bushel of ears of sweet corn, which had not got ripe, on to the snow-crust by my door, and was amused by watching the motions of the various animals which were baited by it."

~ Henry David Thoreau, 1854



From the Federal Cartridge Corporation in the 1930s

GBP Bulletin Archives

Great Birding Projects is a vehicle to promote a creative approach to bird-related editing, education, tourism, and marketing. GBP functions as a bridge to an innovative engagement between people and birds. You can access all previous issues of the *GBP* bulletin on the GBP website [here](#).

