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Feeding the birds: Volunteers needed to join an international study!

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People who feed birds in the United States and Canada are invited to participate in a study on the feeding habits of birds.

Project Wildbird is a landmark \$1 million study of seed and feeder preferences of wild birds in the United States and Canada. Project Wildbird, which began September 2005 and continues through December 2008, is funded by the Wild Bird Feeding Industry (WBF) Research Foundation. Dr. David Horn, Assistant Professor of Biology at Millikin University is coordinating Project Wildbird, and is assisted by Stacey Shonkwiler, a Millikin senior biology and secondary education major.

Horn is inviting all people who feed birds to assist with the research. "Project Wildbird is ideal for individuals of all ages with a passion for wild birds" says Horn. It can also be used by educators at nature centers, for home schooling projects, and for students or teachers interested in studying food and feeder preferences of wild birds.

Horn seeks two types of volunteers: observational and experimental citizen scientists. The observational approach is best suited for people who can monitor pre-existing feeders in their yard for a few hours each season of the year. Participants also complete a questionnaire on their bird feeding habits.

The experimental approach is for the most dedicated bird feeders. To become an experimental citizen scientist, Horn says participants must meet two criteria. First, participants must be able to monitor the birds at the feeders for 45 minutes every other day each season. They must also be able to rotate and refill feeders regularly. Second, participants must be able to correctly identify 95% of the bird species coming to feeders.

"Participants do not have to be ornithologists but they must be able to distinguish a female house sparrow from a female house finch" stated Horn. "We are looking for volunteers to sign on for a year." Accepted experimental citizen scientists receive, free of charge, four bird feeders, four poles with squirrel baffles and 10 varieties of seed, and their seed supplies are regularly replenished throughout their one-year commitment.

Currently, Project Wildbird has over 160 experimental citizen scientists from 33 states and 2 provinces in Canada. Combined these participants have recorded over 400,000 observations of

birds at feeders. “Preliminary results indicate that birds prefer 5 seed types: black-oil sunflower, fine and medium sunflower chips, Nyjer, and white proso millet” says Horn. “More data will be needed to confirm these results.”

Horn’s research goal is to provide recommendations for seeds and feeders by geographical area and season of the year. The data collected will be used to make decisions about what seed and feeder combinations are attractive to the types of birds one wants in their yard. “Bird feeding is the second most popular hobby behind gardening” Horn said. “While the public’s interest in bird feeding is substantial, the amount of scientific research that has been conducted on wild bird feeding lags far behind.” According to a 2006 survey of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, over 55 million people feed wild birds around their homes and spend more than 4 billion dollars on seed, feeders, houses and baths.

Project Wildbird is funded by companies that sell bird feeding products. “The WBF Research Foundation was established by the WBF to become the expert in wild bird feeding preferences” said Reggie Vanden Bosch, WBF Past President. “The project promises to gather scientific information that will provide the best possible bird feeding experience” Bosch said.

For more information call 1-866-WILDBIRD or visit www.projectwildbird.org