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The birds and the bees

by [Paul Bedard](#)

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My wonderful wife didn't have a very long Christmas list this year. You know, something for the kitchen, something to wear, a bird feeder.

That one was a surprise.

Ever since we moved out of the city and built a house on a cow pasture not far from the Shenandoah River, Michele has been squawking about how our "lazy" birds need to work for their dinners and eliminate all the bugs and flying pests that bite us.

I dutifully listened and put our feeders in a corner of the barn where they collected dust for years.

At first, we really didn't have a lot of birds around because there was no place for them to perch. No trees, no bushes, no nothing.

But man did we have bugs. Like nothing I've ever seen.

Here's just one example: We joined some neighbors for July Fourth fireworks at Franklin Park in Purcellville, Va. When we returned for beers at their house, we were all horrified to find that the front door hadn't been fully closed and a conga line of thousands and thousands of crawling bugs had made a path inside and up the stairs to the one room in which we'd left the light on.

Point taken. Over time, we planted dozens of trees, spruces, apples, peaches, plums, and even pecans.

And the birds came. Robins, blue jays, cardinals, wrens, finches, and blue birds.

We built and put up about 20 bird houses and even put out dryer lint for nest-building momma birds.

But still my wonderful wife said no to the feeders.

That changed this winter. Around the time when birdwatchers were getting ready for this year's National Audubon Society Christmas Bird Count, a good friend added us to their annual "Casual Year Bird Competition" and all of a sudden it was game on.

Now, I didn't mean to be a cheapo in not buying a new feeder, but I had a favorite in the barn that I really wanted to use. It's an anti-squirrel contraption that closes when anything heavier than a bird lands on a wooden bar.

I pulled it out from behind a pile of muddy and bloody goose-hunting decoys, spent about 30 minutes scrubbing the grime and stink and bug poop off, and rigged the rotten wooden perch with duct tape. Fancy, eh?

It gets better. I found a rusty pipe and, with an ax, hammered it into the ground just off the deck and in front of the kitchen window. It's straight enough.

A can of Liquid Wrench to loosen up the nuts on the feeder brace and, presto, it was up.

Drove to Southern States and bought some mixed seed and suet, filled it and — nothing. Had we ignored feeding the birds for so long they didn't even think of looking for the sunflower, millet, and thistle we put out?

Michele added a suet cage filled with yummy fat and still there was very little interest. Just two weeks into the bird count and we were way behind, prompting mocking emails from others in the competition.

So Michele tried something, turning the feeder 90 degrees so the birds could see the house and any possible threats on the deck, such as our dogs. All of a sudden, it looked like an early bird all-you-can-eat buffet at Golden Corral, food flying.

It will take a while to catch up in the bird count, but at least we're back in the game.

The question is when the spring wave of biting insects arrives, and those "lazy" birds take the seed instead, will the feeder stay up?

It probably depends on how we're doing in the count. For now, I'm heading back to the barn to dig out some more feeders.

Paul Bedard is a senior columnist and author of Washington Secrets.