

Caring for Our Coastal Birds

How to Properly Clean Bird Feeders on the Outer Banks



Outer Banks, North Carolina

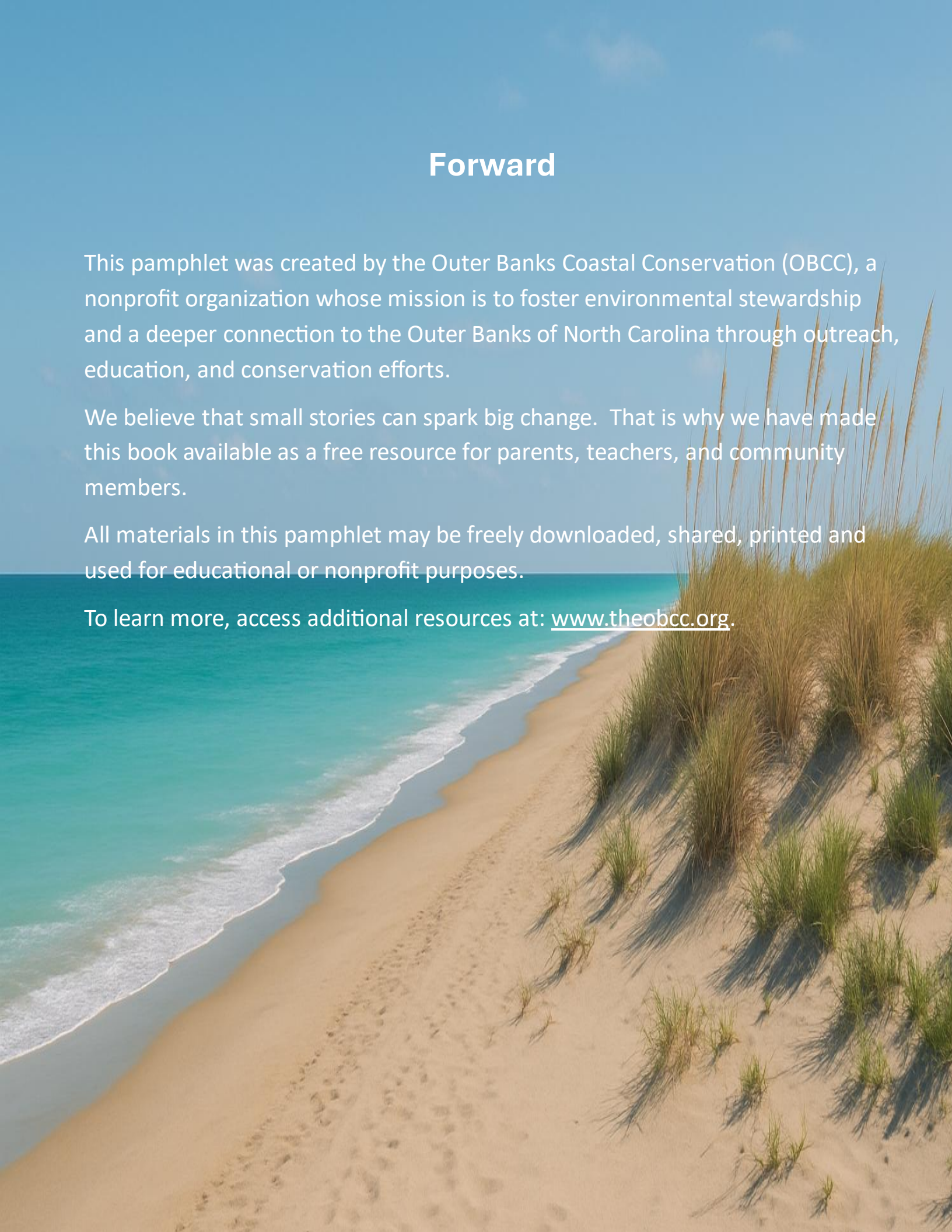
Forward

This pamphlet was created by the Outer Banks Coastal Conservation (OBCC), a nonprofit organization whose mission is to foster environmental stewardship and a deeper connection to the Outer Banks of North Carolina through outreach, education, and conservation efforts.

We believe that small stories can spark big change. That is why we have made this book available as a free resource for parents, teachers, and community members.

All materials in this pamphlet may be freely downloaded, shared, printed and used for educational or nonprofit purposes.

To learn more, access additional resources at: www.theobcc.org.



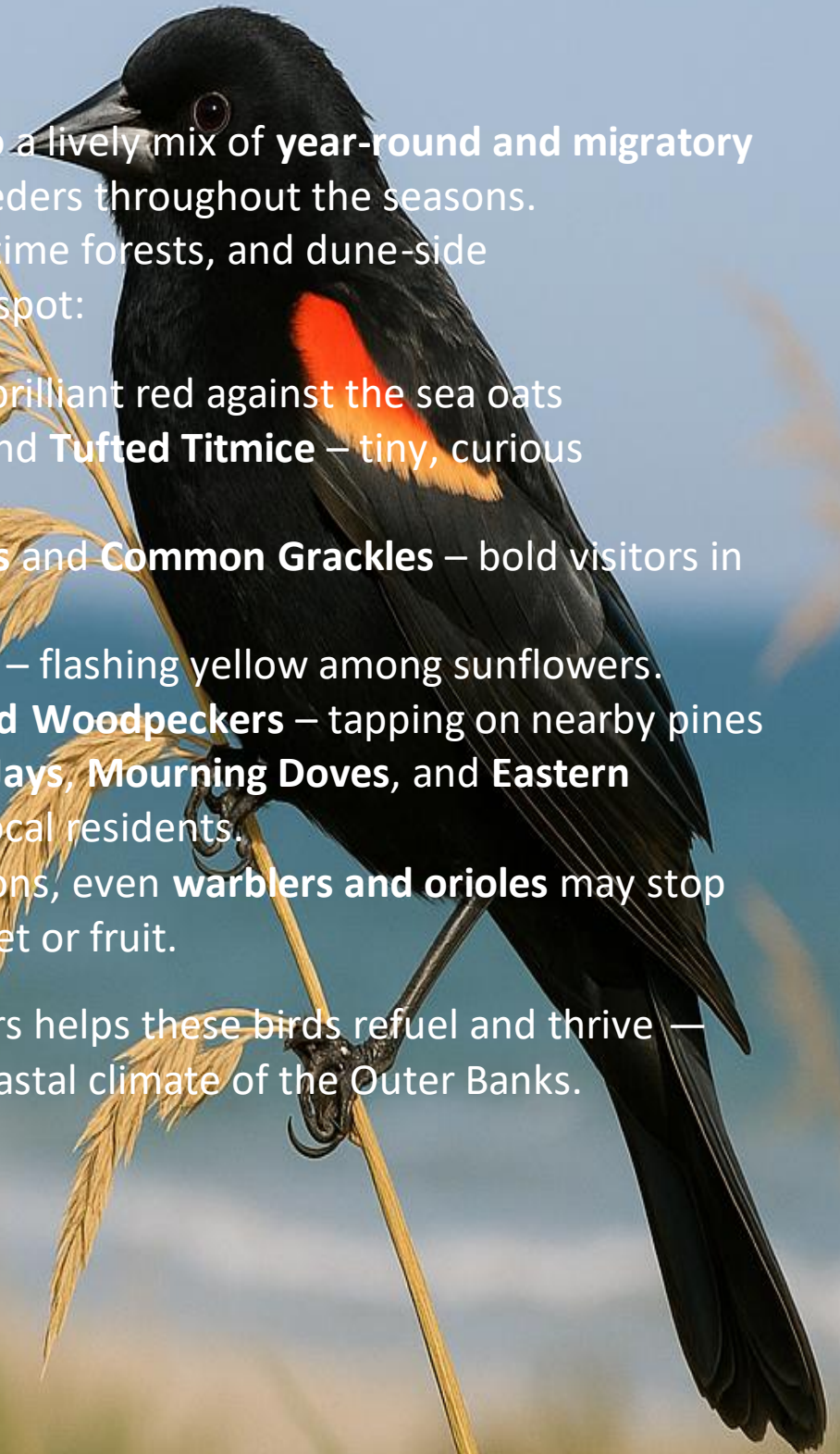
A Welcome to Feathered Visitors

The Outer Banks is home to a lively mix of **year-round and migratory birds** that visit backyard feeders throughout the seasons. In coastal woodlands, maritime forests, and dune-side neighborhoods, you might spot:

- **Northern Cardinals** – brilliant red against the sea oats
- **Carolina Chickadees** and **Tufted Titmice** – tiny, curious songbirds.
- **Red-winged Blackbirds** and **Common Grackles** – bold visitors in marshy areas.
- **American Goldfinches** – flashing yellow among sunflowers.
- **Downy and Red-bellied Woodpeckers** – tapping on nearby pines
- **Carolina Wrens, Blue Jays, Mourning Doves, and Eastern Towhees** – common local residents.

During migration seasons, even **warblers and orioles** may stop for a quick snack of suet or fruit.

Providing clean, safe feeders helps these birds refuel and thrive — especially in the shifting coastal climate of the Outer Banks.

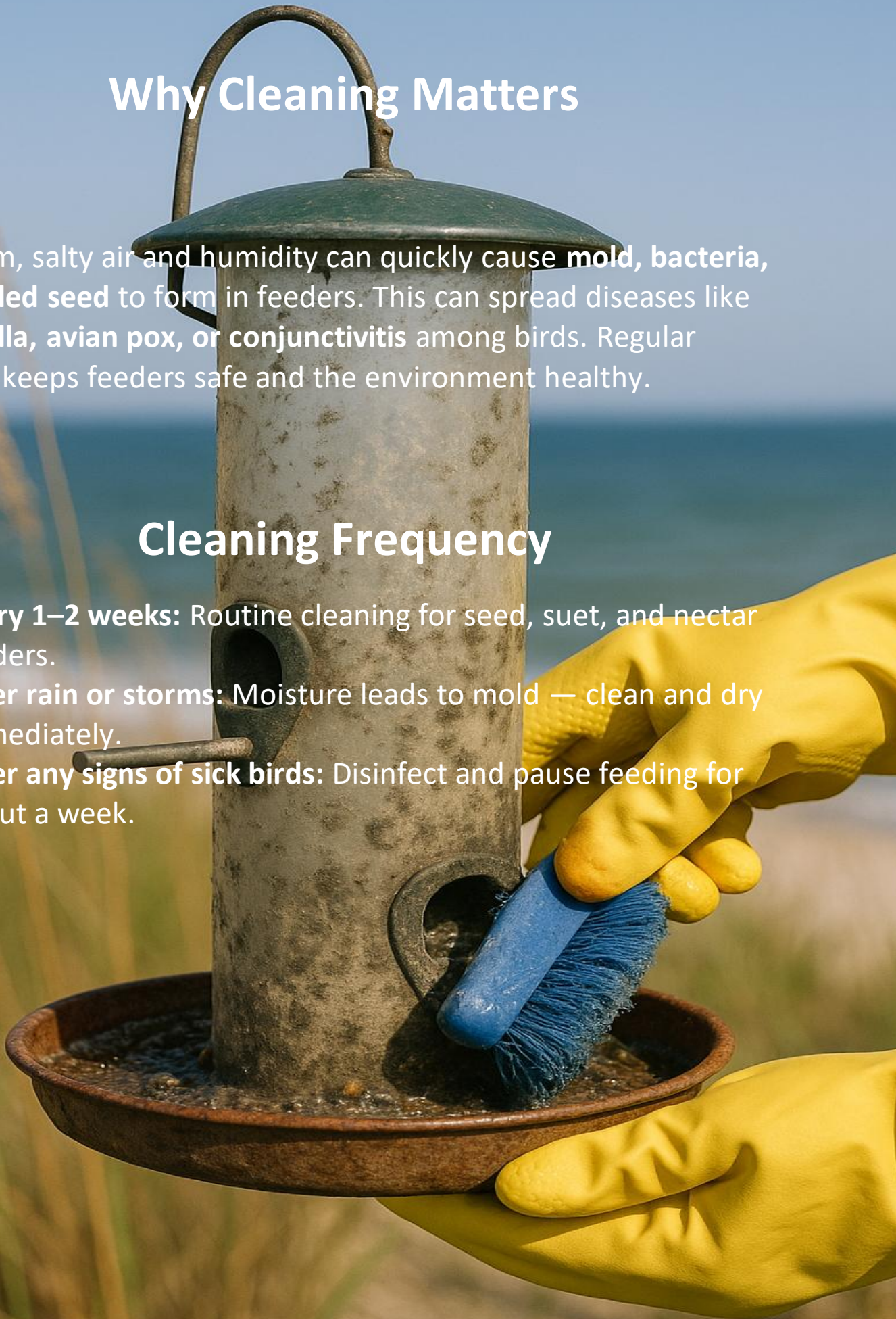


Why Cleaning Matters

The warm, salty air and humidity can quickly cause **mold, bacteria, and spoiled seed** to form in feeders. This can spread diseases like **salmonella, avian pox, or conjunctivitis** among birds. Regular cleaning keeps feeders safe and the environment healthy.

Cleaning Frequency

- **Every 1–2 weeks:** Routine cleaning for seed, suet, and nectar feeders.
- **After rain or storms:** Moisture leads to mold — clean and dry immediately.
- **After any signs of sick birds:** Disinfect and pause feeding for about a week.



Cleaning Steps

1. **Empty the feeder** — discard old or wet seed.
2. **Scrub with hot, soapy water*** using a brush just for feeders.
3. **Soak in disinfectant:**
 - Mix **1 part bleach to 9 parts water** (or $\frac{3}{4}$ cup bleach per gallon).
 - Soak **10 minutes**.
4. **Rinse well** several times.
5. **Air dry completely** before refilling.
6. **Clean the ground below** to remove dropped seed and waste.

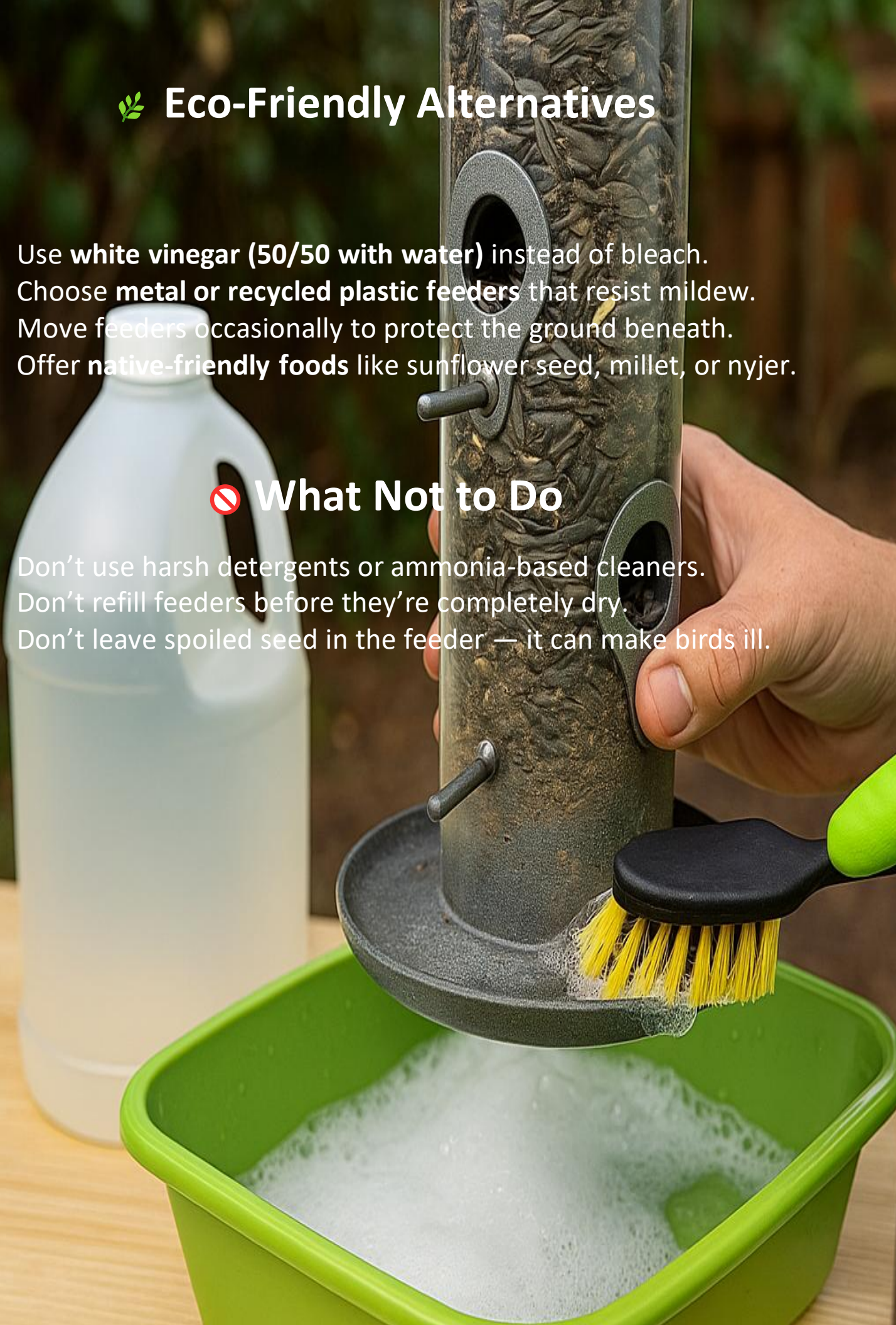
*What “Soapy Water” Means: Use **hot water mixed with a mild, unscented dish soap**—just a few drops per quart of water—to loosen seed residue and dirt. Choose a **biodegradable or non-toxic soap** that’s safe for wildlife, such as Dawn®, Seventh Generation®, or Ecover®. Avoid antibacterial or heavily scented cleaners, as these can leave harmful residues. After scrubbing, **rinse the feeder thoroughly several times** with clean water before disinfecting or refilling.)

🌿 Eco-Friendly Alternatives

- Use **white vinegar (50/50 with water)** instead of bleach.
- Choose **metal or recycled plastic feeders** that resist mildew.
- Move feeders occasionally to protect the ground beneath.
- Offer **native-friendly foods** like sunflower seed, millet, or nyjer.

🚫 What Not to Do

- Don't use harsh detergents or ammonia-based cleaners.
- Don't refill feeders before they're completely dry.
- Don't leave spoiled seed in the feeder — it can make birds ill.



Hummingbird Feeders

Outer Banks hummingbirds (mainly **Ruby-throated Hummingbirds**) love clean feeders filled with **fresh 4:1 sugar water** — no dyes.

Rinse and refill **every 2–3 days in summer heat** to prevent fermentation or mold.



Facts About Feeding Birds on the Outer Banks

- **Feeder visitors vary by season.**

In spring and summer, look for colorful **cardinals, goldfinches, blue jays, and hummingbirds**. In fall and winter, **sparrows, wrens, chickadees, and woodpeckers** become more frequent guests.

- **Hummingbirds can be year-round residents.**

Though most **Ruby-throated Hummingbirds** migrate south, a few stay through winter — especially in sheltered coastal gardens. Occasionally, rare **Rufous Hummingbirds** from the western U.S. are seen feeding here in the cooler months.

- **Clean feeders prevent disease.**

Birds can catch illnesses like **salmonella** and **avian pox** from dirty feeders. A regular cleaning schedule — especially after rain or storms — keeps your visitors healthy.

- **Salt air and humidity speed up spoilage.**

The Outer Banks' coastal climate can make seed clump and mold faster, so it's important to **empty and wash feeders every week or two**.

- **Natural food sources matter too.**

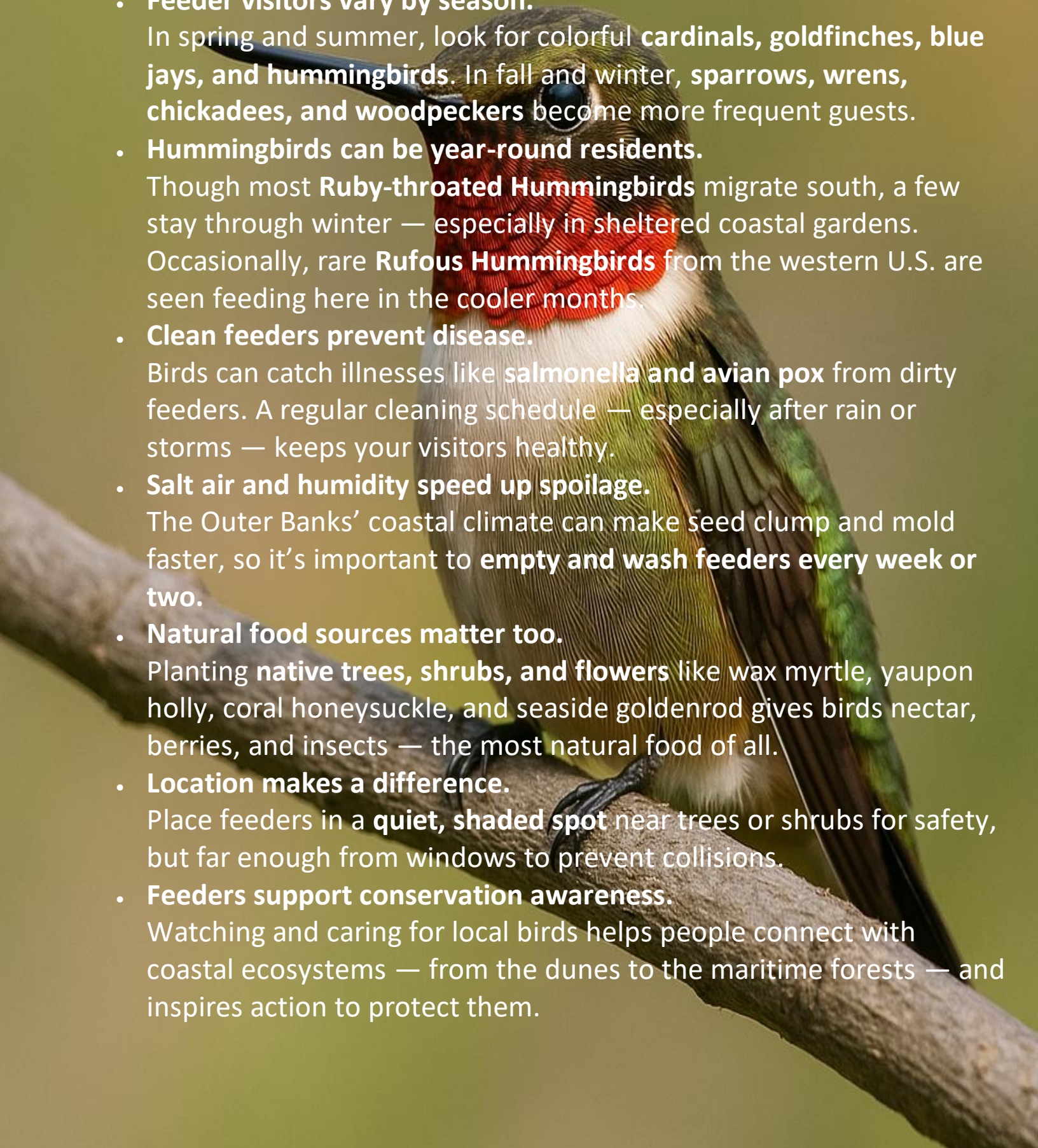
Planting **native trees, shrubs, and flowers** like wax myrtle, yaupon holly, coral honeysuckle, and seaside goldenrod gives birds nectar, berries, and insects — the most natural food of all.

- **Location makes a difference.**

Place feeders in a **quiet, shaded spot** near trees or shrubs for safety, but far enough from windows to prevent collisions.

- **Feeders support conservation awareness.**

Watching and caring for local birds helps people connect with coastal ecosystems — from the dunes to the maritime forests — and inspires action to protect them.



Did You Know?

- Some **hummingbirds** now spend the winter on the **Outer Banks!** While most **Ruby-throated Hummingbirds** migrate south in fall, a few hardy individuals — and even rare western species like **Rufous Hummingbirds** — have been spotted overwintering along the coast, taking advantage of mild temperatures and nectar-rich native plants.
- The **salty air** and **humid coastal climate** can cause feeder food to spoil faster than in inland areas — so Outer Banks feeders need extra care and cleaning.
- **Birds remember safe feeding spots.** Keeping feeders clean and full encourages generations of the same feathered families to return year after year.
- **Native landscaping** — like wax myrtle, yaupon holly, and seaside goldenrod — provides natural food and shelter for local birds long after the feeders are empty.



References

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