



IDEAS &
RESOURCES

WINTER PACK

FAITH
ACTION
FOR NATURE

An invitation to the feast – a reflection on generosity

Wildlife Food Bank – encourage your community to feed the birds

Children's activity: making bird cake – good winter food for birds

Worship resource – our tree-planting God

Churchyard food sources – adding trees and shrubs as food sources

Family activity – apple feeders

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Feast

In winter the world goes into retreat. The trees stand bare, the grasses and wildflowers die back. Nature seems dormant, and in some cases that's literally the case, as hibernating creatures sleep the coldest months away.

Of course, one of the reasons that nature seems dormant in winter is that we spend more time indoors, and are more likely to miss the wildlife around us. There's still plenty going on, and in some ways this is a time to pay closer attention, as we may be able to offer a helping hand.

These resources have all been produced to inspire Christians and churches to get outside into nature, to appreciate it, care for it, and find the creator through it. Use and adapt whatever you like, and pass them along to others. Please let us know what you find most useful, and it will help to guide future resource packs – there is a short survey to fill in on www.faithactionfornature.org



AN INVITATION TO THE FEAST

One of the recurring images of the Kingdom of God is a banquet – a lavish feast thrown by a generous host. The finest food and wine is laid on, and everyone is welcome. Unlikely guests are brought in from the backstreets and the country lanes. Rich and poor, powerful and powerless, the hungry and the full, all sit together at the same table.

It's a powerful image, all the more so in a world where so many don't have enough to eat. It emphasises God's welcome, and shows that generous provision is one of God's defining characteristics. This is not a feast of selfish indulgence, but a celebration in the joy of God's presence, to which all creation is invited. In God's economy, nobody goes without. "Give thanks to the Lord for his love", says Psalm 107:8-9. "He satisfies the thirsty and fills up the hungry."

In Jesus' parables about feasts and wedding banquets, the guests are always human. Other parts of the Bible celebrate how God provides for wildlife too, giving the birds the food they need, or sending the rain for the trees and the wildflowers. God "provides food for the cattle," says Psalm 147, "and for the young ravens when they call."

As communities of worship, we can reflect the character of God to the world around us by extending generosity and hospitality to those that need it. That includes wildlife – especially in winter. How can we make our gardens places of plenty? Do animals, birds and insects experience the church as places of abundance or scarcity? Whether we have a churchyard, a back garden, a window box or a pot plant, how could we lay on a feast for local wildlife?

One of the best ways to provide a feast for wildlife is to plant fruit trees or shrubs with berries. Read on for practical activities, and for worship resources that reflect on trees and their role.



THE WILDLIFE FOOD BANK

Many churches host food banks or store cupboards for people in need, and it's an important way of serving the local community. What if we did something similar for wildlife?

Use this activity to open up conversations about wildlife and encourage people to take an interest in the creatures that share their garden.

1. Create a food store, maybe using a wooden crate or a decorated cardboard box. Put a sign on it to tell people what it is: the 'wildlife food bank'. A children's group or youth group might like to make this.
2. Set it up at the front of church in a nice visible spot, and stock it with bird seed, nuts, and fatballs (see the children's activity). You may like to buy some hanging bird feeders as well.
3. Take a moment in a Sunday service to introduce the idea:

Explain: "As a church, we want to see the world the way God sees it. We want to love what God loves, and value what God values. That includes all the creatures that God made and cares for. As Jesus says in the gospels, not one sparrow is forgotten by God. Or see Psalm 147, where the psalmist celebrates the way every animal and bird is provided for.

God loves creation and provides for it. When we take the time to feed the wildlife around us, we join with God in loving the world and caring for it. We value creation the way God values it. Feeding the birds is worship, because it acknowledges God's work and declares the worth of what God has made.

So this winter, we are running a food bank for wildlife. Feel free to help yourself and take something home. And please bring in your own contributions for others over the next few weeks."

4. Once the Wildlife Food Bank has been introduced in a service, re-locate it to the lobby or somewhere convenient where people will see it and use it. Keep it topped up and remind people to make contributions or withdrawals as they fit.

Bird seed and nuts can be bought in bulk bags, which will save money. Consider buying sacks, and then re-packing into smaller paper bags for people to take away.

Hang birdfeeders in the church garden or car park where people will see them as a reminder.

CHILDREN'S ACTIVITY: MAKING BIRD CAKE

Suet cakes, or fat-balls, are a nutritious food for birds, with lots of seeds and fats for the winter. Run this activity with children to encourage them to think about how they can show generosity to wildlife. You could use the resulting cakes to stock up the bird food bank mentioned above, or tie it in with Christmas and make them Christmas puddings for birds.

Note: this activity is not suitable for children with nut allergies, and bird cake is not for human consumption!

You will need:

Bird seed, raisins, peanuts, grated cheese
suet or lard (at room temperature, and chopped into dice-sized cubes)
Yoghurt pots, paper cups or similar, one per child
Scissors and string
Mixing bowls

Method:

First, poke a hole through the bottom of the yoghurt pot.

Push a piece of string through the hole and tie it on the inside. Leave enough string to tie up the fatball later.

Distribute the suet or lard into mixing bowls. Add a handful of nuts, seeds, cheese and raisins and mash it together with your hands.

Add more ingredients as necessary until you get a mixture that holds together well, then press it into the yoghurt pots.

Put the filled pots in the fridge until the fat sets.

Finally, hang the bird cakes up by the string, from bird feeders or from trees.

Bonus ideas:

- Bird cakes can be served in the yoghurt pot, or it can be slipped off once the fat has set, whichever you prefer.
- Encourage the children to think about what the birds will drink too, and make sure there is water available.
- Be sure to dispose of the pots when you're done, to avoid plastic waste.

WORSHIP RESOURCES: OUR TREE PLANTING GOD

Act one of the Bible's story takes place in the garden of Eden. It's where humans take their first steps, and encounter God in creation. It's easily overlooked in the drama that swiftly unfolds, but Genesis 2:9 notes that "the Lord God had planted a garden."

The poetic creation account in Genesis 1 describes God calling plants and animals into being, but chapter 2 suggests something more careful and intentional. The garden, home to the creatures that will carry the divine image, has been created with special attention. It has been designed and planted. Right from the start, God is a gardener.

As the Middle East is a dry region, trees are a sign of water, fertility and blessing. Reflecting these conditions, the Bible often uses trees to illustrate peace and provision. Righteous people are like trees planted by streams. A time of prosperity is imagined where people sit in the shade of their own fruit trees. And often, God is the one planting them. "I will plant trees in the barren desert" God tells Isaiah in a promise of restoration. To be precise, they will be "cedar, acacia, myrtle, olive, cypress, fir and pine," God says, showing once again the divine abundance and diversity of nature. (Isaiah 41:19)

Trees provide shade and shelter. They provide a perch for birds, roots for burrowing animals. They host mosses and climbers, and are home to countless insects. Trees are a source of food and materials, and they cast their many benefits widely. We never know quite who is going to be blessed by a tree, especially one that lives for hundreds of years and well beyond the lifetime of the planter.

It's no surprise then that Jesus compared his kingdom to a spreading tree, in which the birds find a home. Or that Jesus invited us to see ourselves as branches in a vine. Or that Revelation describes the tree of life that stands in the city of heaven, another place planted and prepared for the people God loves.

God is a tree planter.

When we plant trees, we are doing God's work.

Extra ideas:

- Use this reflection to invite people to take part in tree-planting activities, either on church grounds or on your local reserve.
- Take a walk at a nearby reserve and take a moment to consider the trees in particular. Observe the different varieties, and the wildlife and birds that can be seen in them and around them.

A TREE PRAYER

This is an action prayer, where participants join in through movement rather than words. Children can enjoy following the actions and imitating a tree – but everyone is welcome to join in. The leader says the words and demonstrates the actions, everyone else follows along.

Explain: We're going to start off as acorns or conkers.

Action: everybody crouches down as small as they can

Pray: God, we're very small, and don't always understand everything. Please keep us safe.

Explain: Then we're going to turn into a little shoot

Action: still crouching down, everybody raises a hand

Pray: God, as we go out into the world, help us to be brave.

Explain: Now we're getting bigger and we've got some leaves poking out

Action: begin to stand up a little, spread fingers like leaves

Pray: God, let us grow strong in your love.

Explain: Now we've got big branches reaching out.

Action: stand upright, spread arms out from the elbow

Pray: God, give us your light. Help us to turn it into energy to do good things in the world.

Explain: Now we're really reaching up towards the sky, catching all the sun

Action: reach as high as you can towards the sun

Pray: God, help us to catch more and more of your light, so that we can grow to be more like you.

Amen



A PRAYER FOR PLANTING A TREE

Planting a tree is an act of worship, as this prayer highlights. It is taken from the A Rocha service 'The Tree of Life and the life of trees', which is available in full online - see link below. Most trees are planted as whips, but the prayer refers to them as saplings as it is a more familiar word to most people. Feel free to use whatever term suits your audience.

Leader: As we plant, let us commit ourselves to thanksgiving for God's gift of trees and to growing in our care for creation.

Leader: Lord, bless these saplings. Grant them fertility and steady growth. May they be signs of your Kingdom; a Kingdom which starts with the small and weak, but grows in secret and one day will fill the whole of creation. Lord in your mercy,
Hear our prayer.

The saplings are planted in the earth.

Leader: Lord, may they these saplings grow to have deep roots and spreading branches, and may they be fruitful in season. May they be a home to many creatures and a blessing to the community of creation. May we remember to care for them, to water and tend them, and may they teach us about our dependence on trees, and on you. Lord in your mercy,
Hear our prayer.

The saplings are watered.

Leader: Creator God, you planted in Eden a Garden and placed us within the garden to serve and preserve it. Forgive us where we have turned the beautiful variety of creation into infertile deserts. Sow within us once again the seeds of our calling to be good stewards of this created world. May we know our dependence upon you and upon your creation, and through our work and worship may all the trees of field and forest be set free to sing your praise once more.

Through Jesus Christ our Lord, who reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God for ever.

Amen.

- The prayer can be followed by prayers of intercession, thanking God for trees and asking for help in protecting and caring for them.
- For the full service, visit:
<http://atyourservice.arocha.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/The-Life-of-Trees-Service-Order.pdf>

CHURCHYARD FOOD SOURCES

The Faith Action for Nature summer pack explained how to observe and note wildlife food sources. If your church carried out this activity, you may have already noted some opportunities. Have a look at the map that you created, or a list that you drew up of places to add new food sources. If you didn't do that activity in the summer, that's fine too!

The focus for this season is to plant trees and shrubs that will provide food for wildlife for years to come. If you have a churchyard or garden, you may have plenty of space for trees. If you don't, consider shrubs in pots, or an 'edible hedge' along a boundary.

When to plant: Winter is a good time to add new trees and shrubs, as it is less disruptive to their growth. As long as the ground isn't frozen or waterlogged, tree planting can take place any time between October and April, before the growing season begins again.

How to plant: Preparing the ground is important to giving trees a good start. Dig over the soil to aerate it, to the depth of the rootball of your saplings and three times wider. Loosen the soil around the planting hole too, to improve drainage. Add compost or organic matter if the soil is poor.

Planting trees is not difficult, but experienced tree-planters on hand will know tips and tricks to give your trees the best possible chance of success. Speak to your RSPB Scotland contact for advice on what to plant and where.

What to plant:

- If you haven't got a **Rowan** tree nearby, it's a good candidate. The blackbirds appreciate the berries, and the many insects found on Rowans provide for chicks in the spring.
- You won't necessarily want it climbing up the church building, but look for a fence or a shed where you can plant some **Ivy** – it provides food in winter, flowers for pollinators and good shelter for small birds.
- Blackbirds, starlings and many other birds love **Hawthorn**, and caterpillars will enjoy the leaves in the spring.
- **Shrub roses** are good for pollinators, and produce rose hips that animals (and people) can enjoy.
- Birds and small mammals eat **Crab apples**, and the tree will also give you a wonderful blossom display in the spring.
- **Elder** will often invite itself in, but plant one if you haven't got any growing locally. It's popular with insects, animals and birds, and people can make use of elderflowers and elderberries too.
- **Blackthorn** has flowers for pollinators and, sloes in the Autumn, and provides for a variety of insects.
- There are many other options, just be sure to plant native species.

FAMILY ACTIVITY: APPLE FEEDERS

This is a fun activity for children to feed the birds. Use it as an opportunity to talk about food, what animals eat, and how we can care for the wildlife around us. It's a good thing to do on returning from a walk – pick up some thin twigs on the walk and use them to make the feeders when you get home.

You will need:

Apples (one per child)

Apple corer

Sunflower seeds

String

Three twigs

Method:

Core the apples (a job for the adults!)

Thread the string through the hollow apple and tie it to a twig so that you can hang it up.

Carefully insert two more sticks into the apple, one on each side – the birds will use these to perch on.

Poke the seeds into the top of the apple.

Now hang up your feeder in a tree and see which birds come to visit.

Bonus ideas:

- These feeders are a useful way to use up a surplus of apples if you have a tree. Donate a box of apples to Sunday school or a local school, along with these instructions!
- This activity was inspired by the RSPB's resources for children. You'll find many more for families and schools online: <https://www.rspb.org.uk/fun-and-learning/>

WILDLIFE GARDENS IN WINTER

As you think about hospitality and the nature that shares your home, you may want to bring some wildlife-friendly techniques to your gardening. Here are some ideas and tasks for the winter season.

- Crack the ice on bird-baths or ponds to make it easier for birds to get access to water.
- Be aware that creatures may be hibernating in wood piles, outbuildings or sheltered corners of the garden. Try not to disturb them!
- It's always better to let garden waste and prunings rot away naturally, rather than burning them – nature will recycle any nutrients, and provide a habitat for bugs and microbes in the meantime.
- If you are having a bonfire, check it thoroughly for sleepy hedgehogs.
- Autumn is a good time to put up bird boxes, so that birds have more time to get used to them. But it's not too late to install some before the spring.
- As we move into spring, there will be more wildlife to see and enjoy. With these activities and those in the earlier season packs, you should hopefully have made a difference to wildlife and see even more. Make a note of any new species and activity you observe as the days get longer.

TAKING IT FURTHER

- If you enjoy getting out into nature as a family, why not join the RSPB Wild Challenge? Pick an activity that gets you out exploring, then log your activity and work your way towards the bronze, silver and gold badges. See www.rspb.org.uk/wildchallenge
- Wild Christian is a new programme from A Rocha, aimed at helping Christians to engage with the outdoors and care for nature. See arocha.org.uk/wildchristian/ for all the details and to sign up for their regular emails.
- For some seasonal reading, try *Winter World: The ingenuity of Animal Survival*, by Bernd Heinrich, all about how wildlife adapts to the coldest time of the year.
- There's always something happening at your local reserve, whether you want to get your hands dirty with some volunteering, or whether you prefer the safe distance of your binoculars. Visit www.rspb.org.uk or www.scottishwildlifetrust.org.uk to find places to visit and details of events.
- Why not take part in the Big Garden Birdwatch? The survey runs every year at the end of January, full details on the RSPB website.

Photos by Kalle Kortelainen, Galina N/Unsplash, Petr Kratochvil