

Attracting orioles

Baltimore Orioles are one of the most stunning and melodious migrants to visit our area. Orioles almost always arrive in the Twin Cities during the first week of May and, like hummingbirds, begin their southward migration to Florida, Mexico, the Caribbean and northern South America in late August.



The popular Oriole Fest Feeder contains a well for nectar and indentations on the lid for jelly, mealworms or orange slices. A great multi-purpose feeder that is popular with orioles.

The females build magnificent gourd-shaped nests in large shade trees. The nests are usually between 20 and 40 feet high and are woven from milkweed down, dog hair, weed fibers, wool and many other fibrous materials. Orioles often reuse material from their old nests to construct new ones each year. You can do the orioles a favor by providing materials like dog hair or strands of string no longer than 6" long. Providing good habitat, including nesting areas and food sources, will keep orioles coming to your yard. Orioles' food preferences vary as the summer progresses, so it's important to offer a few different types of food.

Nectar Feeders

Orioles, like hummingbirds, are attracted to nectar feeders. High sugar foods like nectar and grape jelly seem to be the preferred food source when orioles first return in early May. When choosing a nectar feeder for orioles, you need to make sure that it has a place for them to perch and a large enough opening for their beaks. There are several popular feeders available that provide a nectar well along with places to offer jelly, oranges and mealworms. We highly recommend purchasing one of these versatile feeders.

Filling Nectar Feeders

There are two different choices of nectar to use in your feeder. You can use packaged nectar, which you simply mix with water according to the instructions, or you can make your own homemade nectar. Orioles prefer a lower sugar base than hummingbirds, so oriole nectar is 1 part sugar to 6 parts water. If you want to make your own nectar, bring 2 cups of water to a boil and then add 1/3 of a cup of sugar. Stir until the sugar has dissolved and boil for one minute to help retard fermentation. Be sure the nectar has fully cooled before filling feeders. You may refrigerate and store any unused sugar solution in a covered container for up to two weeks.

Nectar Feeder Maintenance

Feeders should be emptied and cleaned every two to three days or sooner if the nectar looks cloudy. Scrub the feeder with hot water and a mild detergent, or use a vinegar and water solution. If ants become a problem, you can use an "ant moat" hung on the feeder rod above the feeder. This is a little plastic dish that is filled with water, vegetable oil or petroleum jelly and effectively traps the ants en route down to the feeder.

Grape Jelly and Orange Feeders

In addition to nectar, orioles really enjoy grape jelly. This preference for jelly will diminish when the orioles start to nest. After the young are





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fledged in mid to late July, you'll see them returning to the jelly feeder. We carry beautiful jelly feeders with shallow cups that you can hang and then fill with grape jelly straight out of the jar. (they make a good mealworm feeder, too.) As we mentioned earlier, there are many multi-purpose oriole feeders available that offer areas for jelly or mealworms and spikes for orange halves. Some also have a well for nectar.

Mealworm Feeders

A large part of orioles' diet consists of insects. This is especially true when they are raising their young from mid June through late July. If you've noticed your orioles "disappearing" during this time, it's because you're not offering a protein-based food for them. We recommend putting up a mealworm feeder to keep them coming to your yard. By providing mealworms in a shallow dish-type feeder, you can attract orioles as well as many other bird species. Expect chickadees, nuthatches, bluebirds, cardinals and many others to frequent a mealworm feeder. Mealworms are available at all our stores in various quantities and usually will last a week in your refrigerator.

Getting to Know Your Orioles

In the Midwest, we have Orchard and Bullock Orioles in addition to the Baltimore Oriole. Baltimore Orioles measure around 7.5" in length and have a wingspan of 9-12." The males are a bright orange with a black head and wings; the females are a paler orange with black on their bodies.

Bullock Orioles are primarily found farther south in the Great Plains, but have been known to travel Northward. Orchard Orioles are found throughout southern Minnesota and the Twin Cities.

Orchard Orioles are smaller than the Baltimore Oriole (6-7") and the males are a deep chestnut or red color instead of orange. They have more black on their backs as well. First-year males and females are more of a greenish-yellow than the pale orange Baltimore Oriole.

Orioles incubate 4-5 eggs over 11-14 days. They have only one brood each year and the nestlings fledge in 11-14 days after hatching.

Of interest, male orioles do not achieve their brilliant adult plumage until the fall of their second year. Until that point they'll resemble a female oriole with drabber pale orange colors.



A healthy Baltimore Oriole fledgling. Photo courtesy of the Wildlife Rehabilitation Center of Minnesota.