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LIVING

Feeding birds in winter

Feeding birds has probably never been more popular. The backyard feeder provides a convenient and entertaining contact with wildlife and therefore adds interest to our long winters. At the same time, it

serves to develop a greater understanding and appreciation for our native bird species and, by extension, for the environment in general. It's impossible to care about birds without being extremely concerned about what is happening to this planet.



OUR CHANGING SEASONS

Drew Monkman

However, many people make the mistake of limiting feeding to the winter months. In fact, the greatest feeder activity of the year usually occurs in early October, when a dozen or more species may turn up on a given day. This is also a time of year when uncommon birds like the beautiful fox sparrow may grace you with its presence. I usually start feeding the birds in late September. Southward-bound white-throated and white-crowned sparrows arrive in the Kawarthas at about this time and are easily attracted to our yards, often in large numbers. They are joined soon after by dark-eyed juncos. These three species are primarily ground feeders, so it's essential to scatter lots of seed on the ground.

Late March through May can also be a busy time at feeders. Along with lingering winter finches like redpolls and siskins, migrants such as grackles, brown-headed cowbirds, song sparrows and even red-winged blackbirds are easily attracted. By April, a variety of sparrows will be looking for hand-outs and, come May, you stand a good chance of attracting neo-tropical migrants such as rose-breasted grosbeaks and sometimes indigo buntings. Baltimore orioles and ruby-throated hummingbirds, the two species that come to nectar feeders, are back in early May, as well.

This brings us to a discussion about winter feeding. Why is it that the number of birds visiting feeders — at least in the city — fluctuates so much come December? There are several possible explanations. First of all, many species such as cardinals and house finches travel in flocks in winter and may only frequent a small number of feeders. And, with the number of people feeding birds these days, there are relatively fewer birds to go around. Also, nomadic winter finches such as siskins and redpolls will only turn up at feeders if there is a large natural food crop to attract them to the region in the first place. This year, the bumper seed and berry crop on almost all types of trees will keep most finch species close to the boreal forest this winter. Finally, the presence of a raptor in the neighbourhood like a Cooper's or sharp-shinned hawk may also explain why, on a given day, there are fewer birds. Hawks, of course, are drawn by the fact that people are feeding birds in the first place. I always feel privileged, however, when a hawk makes an appearance



Hairy woodpecker on cone dipped in fat.

Karl Egressy, special to The Examiner

in my yard, even if it means sacrificing a mourning dove or two. It indicates that the food chain is healthy and working as it should.

When it comes to what foods to offer the birds, black oil sunflower seed attracts the greatest number of species. I use it both in my hopper feeders and to scatter on the ground, especially when white-throated and white-crowned sparrows are migrating. Millet, too, is popular with ground feeders, especially juncos and tree sparrows, which prefer these smaller seeds. To attract siskins, goldfinches and redpolls, you will need to provide niger seed in a hanging tube feeder. Woodpeckers are kept happy with commercial suet cakes or beef suet from the butcher.

As for the squirrels, metal guards on the poles seem to keep most of them at bay. Yes, they do take some of the seed I put on the ground or snow, but the many ground-feeding birds that are attracted make up for it. Squirrels also provide great entertainment.

"Be sure to buy a good quality bird feed," advises Dave McLeod, owner of the Avant-Garden Shop on Sherbrooke Street. "Look for seed that is fresh, free of powder and which contains no filler such as wheat or milo. In addition, special spring/summer or fall/winter blends will provide birds with additional ingredients that they require during different seasons. These include protein in the summer and grit in the winter."

People often wonder what impact feeding has on bird populations and whether providing an artificial source of food is really a good thing. Feeding, along with a warming climate, has probably helped some primarily urban species such as house finches, mourning doves and cardinals to extend their range northward. At the same time, how-



American tree sparrow on platform feeder.

Karl Egressy, special to The Examiner

ever, research has shown that most birds do not appear to become overly dependent on feeders and probably need a greater variety of food than feeders alone can provide. In fact, studies with black-capped chickadees have demonstrated that even removing a feeder in mid-winter does not result in greater flock mortality than would normally occur in flocks that do not visit feeders.

On rare occasions, and for unexplained reasons, a species such as a Baltimore oriole or summer tanager may turn up at a feeder in late fall or winter. Even hummingbirds — especially vagrants from the west — occasionally end up at nectar feeders that people have forgot-

ten to bring in. Because these "stragglers" are not able to find food in the wild, they become completely dependent on human offerings of food to survive for any length of time. Several years ago, an Anna's hummingbird survived most of the winter at a feeder near St. Catharines.

People sometimes fear that feeding birds during the migration period might hold them back and somehow stop them from migrating. This is not the case. The allure of migration is simply too strong. I witness this every fall, when hoards of white-throated sparrows visit our yard in October. Despite a daily supply of black oil sunflower seed scattered liberally on the

ground, all of the birds will have departed by the end of the month.

On the negative side, feeders do increase the danger of window kills. One way to reduce this problem is to place the feeder within about 10 feet of the window in question. In this way, birds flying away from the feeder won't be travelling fast enough to seriously injure or kill themselves. Feeders also probably contribute to higher squirrel populations. This can be bad news for certain birds since squirrels and chipmunks are major egg and nestling predators. The blue jay, a regular visitor to feeders, will also dine on other birds' eggs and nestlings.

These problems, however, are no reason to stop feeding the birds. Feeders are a source of joy and a window into the world of bird behaviour. They can also be an effective "hook" for both children and adults in developing a wider interest and appreciation for the natural world. Growing up on Wallis Drive in the 1950s and '60s, the backyard feeder my father built was my introduction to the world of birds. I remember being absolutely fascinated watching the comings and goings, especially when a flock of evening grosbeaks showed up. My interest grew exponentially, however, when a dickcissel, a rare visitor from the mid-west, paid us a visit. I remember the intense pride in having been able to identify the drab, poorly marked bird by myself. My father then asked Doug Sadler, a well-known naturalist, educator and former Examiner columnist, to come over. After Doug confirmed the sighting and congratulated me on my identification, a parade of birders showed up at our house over several weeks to see it — from my parents' bedroom window of all places! For an 11-year-old boy, this was quite an experience. So, if you're still looking for a Christmas gift for a child, a feeder is certainly one to consider.

You may also wish to become a participant in Project Feeder-Watch. It is a continental survey of winter birds that visit backyard feeders in North America. Your feeder observations can provide valuable information that helps ornithologists study and protect birds. For example, data have shown a steady increase in the number of downy woodpeckers at feeders in eastern Canada. You can contact Project FeederWatch at www.bsc-eoc.org/national/pfw.html or by calling 1-888-448-BIRD.

Here are Ontario's 10 most common feeder birds for 2004-05

1. Black-capped chickadee
2. Blue jay
3. Downy woodpecker
4. Mourning dove
5. American goldfinch
6. Dark-eyed junco
7. Northern cardinal
8. White-breasted nuthatch
9. European starling
10. Hairy woodpecker

(Source: Project FeederWatch)

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