Winter Wings

BIRDING IN THE BARREN MONTHS

By Stephen Badger

Autumn's last leaves have fallen and the somber, muted tones of winter have set in. However, for the obstinate, optimistic and observant, the splendid brilliance of natural beauty remains in the flight of colors offered by many beautiful birds. Maryland is home to a diverse array of year-round species and, seasonally, hosts an abundance of visitors that pass through as part of their annual migration.

More than 400 species of birds have been documented statewide. Such a list wouldn't be possible without the tireless help of DNR's wildlife experts, photographers, hunters, homeowners, amateur birders and other stakeholders. Nor would we possess as much detailed biological information about individual species as we do — and that information improves every day.

There is no shortage of enthusiasm when it comes to birding and, to the fortune of scientists, that passion often precedes a wake of dedicated volunteerism, activism and conservationism. Along with DNR, other groups such as the Maryland Ornithological Society and American Birding Conservancy also benefit from the labors of ardent birders. Such groups have been indispensable proponents of conservation, land preservation and a litany of campaigns that generally benefit the environment — from advocating pesticide reduction to addressing habitat loss.

Caring for backyard visitors

Among the many efforts to assist our feathered friends, one stands apart — the work of the backyard birder. From October through April, the natural food sources sought by smaller birds become increasingly scarce and the pursuit of them expends quite a bit of energy. Fortunately, the weary need not fret for long. Somewhere nearby, a well-meaning Marylander has a well-stocked feeder awaiting them. Whether it's done for charity or the pleasure that comes with observation, the simple act of feeding the birds helps maintain healthy populations and offers a view at which few can scoff.

James Phelps

Sinjib Bhattacharyya

Linda Walls

James Phelps

Clockwise from top left: pileated woodpecker; dark-eyed junco; Carolina chickadee; goldfinch

Different birds have different tastes and different preferences for how and where they feed. Feeder placement, food type and presentation are integral to attracting certain species and discouraging others. For best results, avid birders often utilize multiple feeders. Some will be raised; some will be at ground level. Various feeders will offer an array of food options such as seed, fresh fruit or suet.

Generally, folks agree that black oil sunflower seed is an excellent choice that attracts and feeds a wide variety of birds such as cardinals, pine siskins and black-capped chickadees. The seed has thin hulls that most species can crack open as well as the necessary high concentration of fat that winter birds require.

Striped sunflower and safflower are also good choices, and with their slightly thicker hulls, both often prove less palatable for undesirable species such as house sparrows. Some birders choose to use the less-messy option afforded by hulled sunflower, but, unfortunately, it can spoil quickly. For ground feeding birds such as dark-eyed juncos and white-throated sparrows, white proso millet is a good option.

Another act of kindness that avid backyard birders can extend to their feathery friends is the installation and maintenance of heated water dishes. In the winter, many of the sources for drinking water that birds would normally turn to have frozen over. Having a clean, available water source is paramount for bird survival and simple to provide.

Birding backfire

A birder should also consider what to avoid. Inexpensive seed mixes should not be used for a host of reasons. Along with desired guests, such mixes tend to attract non-native species that already thrive because of other human subsidy. Also, they generally contain components such as red millet, oats and other fillers that many birds will disregard. Once picked through, those leftover bits can spoil quickly and serve as ground zero for harmful bacteria and fungi.

All processed human foods should also be avoided as they may contain ingredients that are harmful or toxic to birds — old bread that may contain mold is a perfect example.

Ideal habitat

Maryland is often labeled *America in Miniature*, in part because of its ecological diversity. Agricultural fields, marshes, bogs, swamps, coastal beaches, remote mountains and preserved tracts of forest offer ideal habitat for a wide range of birds. Additionally, many urban and suburban parks and residential neighborhoods are making changes that help them become better suited for bird habitat. The abated use of pesticides and increased use of native plantings are at the forefront of said efforts.

With a little work, just about any backyard can be a sanctuary for birds. To take it a step further, results may be reported to Project Feeder Watch, *Feederwatch.org*, a winter-long survey of birds that visit feeders in backyards, nature centers, and other locales across North America.

More ways to create a healthy backyard and an appealing habitat for native wildlife can be found via the Wild Acres Program within the Quick Links section on DNR's Wildlife site. ■

dnr.maryland.gov/wildlife

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Northern cardinal

In general, feeding wildlife is strongly discouraged. However, provided good choices are made, that rule doesn't apply to birds. Feeding them does not create the same nuisance wildlife situations that occur by feeding other animals. Adult birds don't imprint the way the other wildlife does and bird diseases are not as readily spread to humans.

TIPS AND ADVICE

The friendly gesture of extending a free meal is a tried and true method for attracting birds. Of course, with such reward comes risk. Placing feeders close to windows certainly enhances the view, but can facilitate harmful or fatal bird strikes. Also understand the food itself may end up gaining unwanted attention — mice, chipmunks, squirrels, deer and even bears are well documented, often lamented raiders of accessible bird feeders.

Another factor to consider: predators. Unprotected feeders can be ideal ambush sites for cats and birds of prey. Special consideration should be made in regards to feeder placement, fill levels, refill frequency and food type. For best results, monitor your feeders and address concerns both proactively and responsively. For the love of the birds, keep your cats inside!

Feeding zones for birds can become breeding zones for disease as well. When large numbers of birds congregate, the likelihood of spreading disease rises significantly. To combat this, thoroughly wash and dry bird feeders and baths every 1-2 weeks.

Also consider using multiple feeders spread across a wide area. Such distribution not only addresses the risk of illness, but also reduces competition for food and fighting. Lastly, taking advantage of multiple feeders allows for the use of multiple food types, which helps to attract a wider range of species.