



Wild About Birds

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# BirdChat

Backyard birdfeeding experts serving the Cincinnati area since 1989!

## Turning Your Backyard into Wild Bird Habitat: Fall Clean-up Do's & Don'ts

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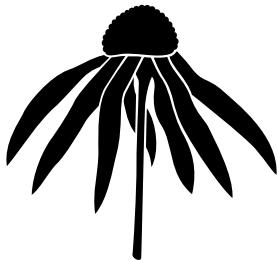
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**I**t's almost autumn; the temperature and humidity are dropping. Are you getting antsy? Do you feel like getting into the yard to rake up leaves and snip off dried-up flower heads? Stop...don't do it!

Go ahead and rake the leaves off your grass but allow some build-up to remain in your beds and around your shrubs. Insects can winter over in leaf litter and will provide a good source of protein for foraging birds in cold weather.



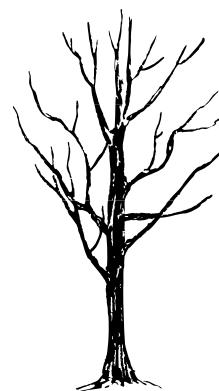
The dried heads of black-eyed Susans, coneflowers, zinnias and many other flowers offer seeds for hungry birds through fall and early winter. If there are some weeds in

the garden at the end of the season, leave them be; the birds will appreciate the seeds they provide and the freeze that arrives with the winter will kill off most of the weeds before next spring's planting season begins.

Pruning evergreen bushes is another chore that can wait until spring: the denser the shrub, the better



cover it will provide our backyard feathered friends on a cold winter's night. If fall pruning is a must for some of your landscape bushes, use the clippings to build a brush pile around your birdfeeding station. Brush piles provide the birds with shelter from the weather and cover from predators. And during storms this winter, the birds will have easy access to birdseed under the pile even when feeders are covered with snow!



If you've been waiting until fall to cut down that dead tree on the edge of your property...wait! Snags (dead trees) provide wild birds with insects and shelter. Unless the snag is a hazard to life or property, let it stand.

So, now that you really don't have anything to do this fall: get the birdfeeding station ready for the winter; put on a light jacket; settle down in a comfy lawn chair; and just watch the birds!



## Species Specifics: Tufted Titmouse

**T**he titmouse is one of the most curious birds in the backyard; set up a new birdfeeding station and titmice will be among your first visitors!

The tufted titmouse is a small, 5", gray, crested bird with a black forehead. It feeds on insects, seeds, and berries. Titmice will frequently visit your birdfeeders for black oil sunflower seeds and suet.

In late winter or early spring flocks break up into nesting pairs. The male sings the peter-peter song defending its breeding territory. Courtship follows and includes wing quivers and mate-feeding.

The male and female titmouse explore many

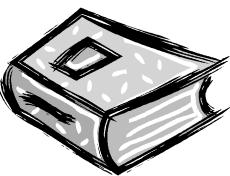
cavities—natural and manmade nesting boxes—before choosing one in which to build their nest. The female spends 7-11 days building a nest of leaves, moss, bark, and hair. She lays 4-8 white

eggs speckled with small brown dots. She alone incubates the eggs for 13-14 days. The babies stay in the nest for 17-18 days. After fledging, the young birds continue to beg their parents for food for another 4 weeks.



nuthatches, all fall and winter, going their separate ways at the start of the following nesting season.

*"The male sings the peter-peter song..."*



## Basic Bird Identification Techniques

**I** think the most exciting thing about backyard bird watching is identifying unfamiliar species. At this time of year, during migration, you're likely to see different species visit your feeding station. Bird identification can be a real challenge, so here are some pointers.

First and most important, really **look** at the bird. Do not run off to get your binoculars or your field guide. Chances are that by the time you return, your subject will have flown off! If you happen to have your binoculars with you, remember, stare at your subject for a few seconds first, then bring the binoculars to your eyes without moving your head or eyes. Study the bird carefully from head to tail – consider its general size and shape, get a good look at the beak and head markings, and check out the wings, legs, and tail. What you are looking for are *field marks*, those characteristics that will help you differentiate your bird from the others pictured in your field guide.

**Size/Shape:** The first thing you should notice about the bird you're trying to ID is its general size. I do this by using a comparison to a common bird. For instance, is the bird the size of a finch, a blue jay, or a crow? Is it sleek and narrow like a titmouse or is it stocky and plump like a robin?

**Beak & Head Markings:** What kind of a beak does your bird have—a conical beak like a cardinal, a tiny, short beak like a chickadee, a fine pointed beak like a gold finch, or a long heavy beak like a woodpecker? Look for stripes on the head. Is the head or face an unusual color? Does the bird have a line over its eye or an eye-ring?

**Wings:** Sometimes the absence or presence of wing-bars is key to making an identification.

**Legs:** Birds' legs can be black, gray, tan, yel-

low, pale, etc. Leg color helped me identify a Louisiana waterthrush in my yard – they have pink legs!

**Tail:** Is the bird's tail long or stubby? Is it forked or a different color than the body? Does the bird hold its tail cocked up or down and does it bob or wag? Again, my waterthrush is a tail bobber, another characteristic that helped me identify it.

I know this sounds like a lot, but just remember, look for the most obvious field marks or characteristics. Study the bird for as long as you can. After the bird has flown off, open your field guide and try to put a name to the bird you have been studying. Don't forget to look at the range map. This is often an important clue. For instance, if you have identified a swallow (bluish on top with a rusty throat), and can't decide if it is a barn swallow or a cave swallow, you would eliminate the cave swallow because, according to the range map, it does not reside in our area. (Note: If you had gotten a good look at the swallow's tail you'd also have eliminated the cave swallow because its tail is squared off vs. the forked tail of the barn swallow.)

If you misidentify some birds along the way, don't despair, we all do, whether we're novices or have a life list of 250 birds. What's important is you're learning and you're adding another dimension to your backyard bird watching – a hobby that you can enjoy for many years to come! I've identified 71 different species in my Milford backyard and at least 25 of them are regular visitors at the feeding stations. Fall migration is just getting under way. I wonder how many new species I can identify and add to my "yard list" this year?!

# A Funny Thing Happened on the Way from the Bank to the Bird Store...

Over the years many of you have asked me how I ever got started in this business. Well, here's the whole story... After graduating from college in California where I lived for 25 years, I went into banking (that's right—business suits, boring meetings—yikes!) but had I not been a banker I would not have met my husband Ken who is still in banking (yep—business suits, boring meetings—but he loves it!).

While we were in CA the only birds I paid much attention to were the road runners and quail we came across during our walks in the foothills behind our home; we fed only hummingbirds then. In 1991 we moved to St. Louis and I decided not to get back into the corporate life. One Saturday during that first winter, the hardware store down the street hosted a slide presentation on backyard birds; I dragged poor Ken to that early morning meeting and we won the door prize—a birdfeeder and a bag of seed.

With a lot of free time on my hands for the first time in 20 years, I started noticing what was go-



ing on in our backyard and a whole new world opened up to me. My girlfriends got sick of me talking about all the different birds I'd identified and suggested I check out the wild bird store in town. I did just that and started working there two days later.

I learned a lot about birds and the wild bird store business from that first shop owner. I was also a Volunteer Naturalist with the Missouri Department of Conservation and in that capacity further increased my knowledge.

I started working part time at *Wild About Birds* a few months after moving to Milford in 1994. In early 1998 the original owner, Gary Hetzell, decided to sell the shop and...well, as they say, the rest is history!

A funny thing happened on the way from the bank to the bird store...I fell in love. I fell in love with a banker, I fell in love with backyard bird-feeding, I fell in love with *Wild About Birds*, and I fell in love with you, my customers who have supported this shop for more than fifteen years and will be my friends for a lifetime!



*"I learned a lot about birds and the...business from that first shop..."*

**D**ear BirdGal, Someone told me that if I don't take my hummingbird feeders down by Labor Day, the hummers won't migrate. Is this true? Michelle

Dear Michelle, No, this is not true! It is a myth that hummingbirds will not migrate if we don't take the feeder down. Migration is an instinct triggered by length of day. All migrating birds leave when their "internal clocks" tell them to whether you have feeders out or not. You should leave your hummingbird feeders up until at least a week or two goes by without seeing hummers. This will ensure a constant supply of nectar to help the migrants keep their fat reserves up as they pass through our area from up north on their long journey back to their wintering grounds in Mexico and Central America. Leave feeders up until late October! BG

*BirdGal, What are those moths in my birdseed and how can I get rid of them? Grossed Out in Milford*

Dear Grossed Out, Birdseed isn't processed like human food and isn't subject to the same guidelines. The seeds are harvested, lightly cleaned of debris and then packaged. Insects have laid eggs in/on the seeds in the field and some of those eggs end up in the bags. When the weather warms up in the summer those eggs are going to hatch. The biggest problem of all is the meal moth. It starts out "webby" and worm-like (larvae) then morphs into the moth. If the moths get into your house they will make a bee-line for your pantry and invade all your grain based dry products, lay eggs and start the cycle all over. So, during warmer months, buy smaller amounts of seed more frequently and store seed in a container with a tight fitting lid in the garage or in a shed. BG

*Dear BirdGal, I saw the strangest new bird in my yard late this summer. It looked like a cardinal but it had a black head. What kind of bird was it? Perplexed*

Dear Perplexed, I hear about bald cardinals (the head looks black because the skin shows) every year at this time. The head is the one area of the bird's body it can not reach for preening and removal of parasites. Feathers destroyed by mites will fall out leaving the bird temporarily "bald"; the feathers will grow back during the bird's normal molt this fall. BG



Dear BirdGal



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*(...and gift shop)*

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### Things to do!

- ✓ Fall is the perfect time to plant bushes that provide food (berries) and shelter for birds during cold weather.
- ✓ Clean all your feeders with a 10% bleach/water solution and a stiff brush so they'll be ready when winter arrives.
- ✓ Make sure your heated birdbath or birdbath de-icer is in working order before the cold season begins.
- ✓ Most swifts and swallows have started their southern migration; its time to clean and plug-up (or take down) the purple martin house.
- ✓ Close your garden pond when water temperatures get down to 50°F.
- ✓ Watch for unusual species in your backyard as migration gets underway.
- ✓ Clean out all your nesting boxes and prepare them for winter roosting by adding an insulating layer, about 3", of clean, dry grass to the bottom.



### Did you know?

- ❖ Hummingbirds can eat 30% of their weight in nectar every day.
- ❖ Birds of prey do not sing; their vocalizations are calls.
- ❖ Goldfinches nest later than other backyard birds. They wait until thistle down is available for nest building and seeds are available for food. Unlike most bird species, goldfinches feed their babies regurgitated seeds not insects!
- ❖ Birds are the only animals with hollow bones; flying is easier with lightweight skeletons!
- ❖ Most birds' eyes weigh more than their brains.
- ❖ If woodchucks, which are rodents, didn't gnaw and thus grind down their teeth, their teeth would grow about  $\frac{1}{4}$ " per month.
- ❖ 75% of wild birds die before they are 6 months old.
- ❖ A raccoon's life span is about 6 years in the wild.