



Wild About Birds

Winter 2005

# BirdChat

Backyard birdfeeding experts serving the Cincinnati area since 1989!

## Turning Your Backyard into Wild Bird Habitat: Surviving Winter

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Dear BirdGal

**S**urvival for birds, just like people, depends on maintaining a warm body temperature. During the cold winter months birds don't have the luxuries we do of heated homes and sweaters, scarves, mittens, and parkas! But they do have means



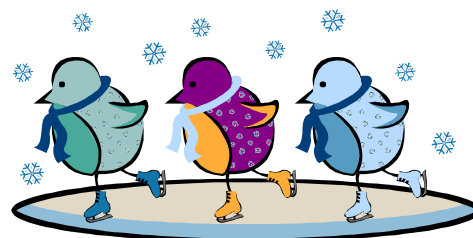
for combating the cold and we can help them by providing shelter and maintaining well stocked feeding stations.

In the fall birds molt and grow new feathers which they can fluff up for insulation. Loose down feathers trap air between the feathers and skin which reduces heat loss. The high body temperature of birds (102-112°) is maintained by a high rate of metabolism. Some species of birds lower their body temperature at night 10-20° to slow their metabolic rate. Most birds roost in protected areas and some gather together in tree crevices to share body heat. A customer of ours has reported regularly seeing fifteen or more bluebirds emerge from a sun warmed roosting box after having spent a cold winter night huddled together inside! The muscular activity of shivering also keeps birds, and us, warm by producing heat.

You can help the birds survive the winter by providing additional shelter in your wild bird

habitat. Build a dense brush pile of branches from last fall's pruning chores. If you haven't yet discarded your Christmas tree, remove all the trimmings and put it outside near your feeding station to serve as cover or a windbreak. You can also help keep the birds warm this winter by adding a 3-4" layer of dried grass to the bottom of the cleaned-out nesting boxes in your backyard. The grass will provide insulation for roosting birds. To insulate your birdhouses even more, use removable weather stripping to fill in the ventilation holes or slits in the top of the box.

The birds need for food increases as the temperature drops. It takes a lot of energy for a little bird to keep warm on cold winter days and it takes a lot of food for little birds to maintain that high level of energy! Your feeding station should be stocked with high calorie bird food – black oil sunflower seeds, peanuts, mealworms, and suet are all good choices. Don't forget to sweep the snow off the feeders after a storm and keep the area under the feeder clear so you can provide a mix of millet and cracked corn for the ground feeders. It takes energy for birds to eat snow if no water is available so keep your birdbath de-iced for them.



This winter, the birds will appreciate the wild bird habitat you've created for them in your backyard and you will be rewarded by their presence and marvel at their ability to survive!

*Wild About Birds* is owned and operated in Milford, Ohio by Peggie Flierl. *BirdChat* is a periodic newsletter written by Ms. Flierl for customers of *Wild About Birds*. Material appearing in *BirdChat* may not be reprinted without permission. Any comments should be directed to Ms. Flierl at:

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## Species Specifics: Northern Flicker

*"The male flicker has a black mustache."*

I've heard this bird referred to as the "un-woodpecker" and as you read on I think you'll learn why! The northern flicker is about 12½" long with a wing span of about 20". The flicker has a brown back with narrow black bars, a black chest patch, and spots on the belly. The red-shafted flicker resides in western north America. The flicker that resides in our area is called the yellow-shafted flicker because it has bright yellow on the underside of its wings and tail; it has a red crescent on the back of its head, a tan face, and a gray crown. The male flicker has a black mustache.

Flickers will visit your birdfeeding station for seeds, peanuts, and suet but ants make up about 45% of their diet! Since flickers spend a lot of time foraging on the ground, their brown color camouflages them better than would the typical black/white coloration of other woodpeckers. Flickers also do a lot less drumming during courtship than most woodpeck-



ers; they issue a long loud call instead—kwikwikwikwi. You'll also recognize courting flickers by their head bobbing while chasing one another around the trunk of a tree. Two males head bobbing indicates competition for a mate or territory!

Flickers are not very strong excavators and once they find a stump or tree trunk with soft wood they often return to it year after year and hollow out a new nest with a 2" hole 10-30' off the ground. Both the male and female incubate 7-9 eggs for about 12 days. The babies remain in the nest for more than 3 weeks. Flickers are strong fliers as soon as they fledge but stay with their parents and are fed by them for 2-3 more weeks. Flickers have 1-2 broods each year.

Flickers that reside in the far north migrate south in the fall which explains why our population increases as the migrants join our resident flickers for the winter.

## How to Baffle the Critters

Don't give up feeding the birds this winter just because you are overrun with squirrels and raccoons. There are several ways to "baffle" the critters and keep them from raiding your feeders.

### Squirrel-Proof vs. Squirrel-Resistant

There are several feeders on the market that are labeled "squirrel-proof". Buyer beware – many of these feeders are only squirrel-resistant. Here's the difference: squirrel-resistant means squirrels should not be able to damage the feeder, squirrel-proof means they should not be able to damage the feeder nor get to the seed within. Some squirrel-proof feeders are tube type feeders enclosed in a wire cage. Small birds can get through the wire but squirrels can not. Another very effective squirrel-proof feeder has a weight activated perching bar – birds only weigh a few ounces so even several birds will not activate the perch but a squirrel's weight will cause the bar to close the feeder.

### Pole Mounting Feeders

You can mount a feeder on a pole or hang it from a shepherd's crook and keep the critters out as long as you place it at least 10' from a "launching pad" (tree, fence, wall, bush, etc.) and place a baffle on the pole at least 5' from the ground. A

baffle is a barrier device that fits around the pole and prevents the squirrel from climbing. Remember: squirrels can jump 8-10' horizontally and 4-5' vertically. They can also drop onto your feeders from tree limbs!

### Tree Hanging Feeders

Baffling a feeder hanging in a tree is very difficult. The only successful method is to hang the feeder, with a baffle above it, at the very end of a lone branch, 10' from the trunk and 5' feet off the ground.

### Deck Mounting Feeders

This is a situation where the only real defense against squirrels is to use a squirrel-proof feeder. Even deck arms that extend 3-4' off the deck won't stop a squirrel from jumping onto the feeder from the deck rail or simply climbing out on the deck arm.

### Safflower Seed

Another way to discourage squirrels is to change the seed in your feeder to safflower seed. Safflower is a white, oil seed similar in shape and size to black oil sunflower seed. Squirrels usually do not like safflower seed while the songbirds (cardinals, chickadees, titmice, nuthatches, finches, etc.) relish it!



*"...place a baffle on the pole at least 5' from the ground."*

## Wild About Birds' Seasonal Shopping Guide ~ Winter 2005

**T**his winter, stay inside where it's warm; all you'll need to identify the birds that visit your backyard is a good pair of binoculars and a field guide. Did you know that *Wild About Birds* carries all the well known field guides and moderately priced, high quality binoculars?

When shopping for binoculars there are two numbers you need to pay attention to: Examples are 8X42 and 7X35 and 10X50. The first number (i.e. 8X) is the magnifying power—objects will appear 8 times closer than they really are. The second number (i.e. 42) is the diameter of the objective lens—the lens farthest away from your eye. The larger this lens is the more light it allows into the binocular; the more light, the brighter the image.

Whether you're a backyard bird watcher or a world-traveling birder, *Wild About Birds* carries a field guide just right for you! If you are strictly a backyard birder, like I am, then the Stokes' field guide might be your choice. If you're new to bird watching, check out the beginner's guides by Stokes, Peterson, the American Bird Conservancy, and the Audubon Society – one of them will probably be perfect for you! Some folks prefer photographs rather than artists' interpretations, so Stokes' guides, the *Birds of Ohio*, and the National Audubon Society guides are for you. Birders looking for a field guide that's a tad more sophisticated should check out Kaufman's focus guide, the fourth edition of the National Geographic field guide, and Sibley's field guide.

Print isn't the only media available for assistance in bird identification. We have videos (for purchase or rental) from Stokes, the Audubon Society, and George Harrison (no, not the Beatle!). Peterson has some terrific CDs/cassettes for bird song and bird call identification. We also carry Cornell Lab of Ornithology's CD-ROMs for your PC.

Come check out our new line of very **AF-FORDABLE** binoculars—Audubon Binoculars by Sheltered Wings:



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(Coupon expires 02/20/05)



## Wild About Birds' Seasonal Shopping Guide ~ Winter 2005

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**W**oodpeckers are close to the top of my "favorite bird list". There are six woodpecker species that are year round residents of the Cincinnati area—downy woodpecker, hairy woodpecker, red-bellied woodpecker, red-headed woodpecker, pileated woodpecker, northern flicker—and in the winter we are visited occasionally by the yellow-bellied sapsucker. The downy and the red-bellied are probably the most common woodpecker visitors at the feeding station; the hairy also visits the feeder often. The pileated woodpecker will come out of the woods when natural resources become limited. The red-headed is, in my opinion, the most beautiful of all the woodpeckers, but unfortunately humans have destroyed so much of its habitat that it is now a rarity in our area. Customers have, however, reported more sightings of the red-headed in the past few years—a good sign I hope!

Most woodpeckers prefer a protein rich diet (insects!) and in winter will visit feeding stations for good protein replacements—suet and peanuts!

*Wild About Birds* carries a variety of feeders for suet and/or peanuts—suet cages large and small, suet logs, suet ball feeders, peanut feeders with suet cages, etc. We also stock several different "flavors" of suet in varying shapes and sizes to fit each type of feeder. Peanuts are available in the shell and out in several different sized bags.

Welcome the woodpeckers to your wild bird habitat this winter; stock your birdfeeding station with suet and peanuts!

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Suet and peanuts to fit all the different feeders:



Suet feeders and peanut feeders—all shapes and sizes:



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(Coupon expires 02/20/05)

# My Winter Visitors

I am an avid backyard bird watcher (like you didn't already know that) and my favorite time of year is winter. It's not the snow, ice and frigid temperatures I like (I'm not nuts, though some may argue that point) but I am crazy about the diversity of bird species that are attracted to my feeding stations this time of year.

During the winter, I enjoy watching the show in my Milford backyard while sitting back in the warmth of my family room. On most days I'll observe several juncos and white-throated sparrows cleaning up the spilled seed under the big tray feeder I keep filled with Songbird Mix. The suet and peanut feeders that are on my deck attract visiting red-breasted nuthatches as well as the year round residents of my yard – red-bellied woodpeckers, downy and hairy woodpeckers, white-breasted nuthatches, blue jays, chickadees and titmice. Occasionally, the huge pileated woodpecker that lives in our woods will make a winter appearance at the suet feeder and flickers visit the deck more regularly during the colder months. Yellow-



bellied sapsuckers, here only in the winter, might also find the suet feeder appealing. I keep a mealworm feeder on my deck rail all year and the Carolina wrens are in and out of it every day! The tray feeder mounted off the deck, filled with safflower to keep the squirrels at bay, is the fa-

vorite of cardinals, doves and house finches. If it's a "finch invasion" year, we'll see pine siskin and purple finches alongside the goldfinches on the nyjer feeder. Although they don't come to my feeders, it's always fun to watch the little brown creepers making their way up the trunks of the trees close to the house searching for morsels of food in the bark crevices. As the season progresses and natural sources of food (seeds, nuts, berries) start dwindling, towhees, yellow-rumped warblers, and song sparrows will

often visit my feeding stations.

Yes, I do look forward to this time of year as I anxiously wait at my window to see who might visit today. Go ahead, call me crazy, but I love winter!

*"I am crazy about the diversity of bird species...this time of year."*

*Dear BirdGal, I enjoy feeding my backyard birds but I'm worried that they'll become dependent on me. I usually go to Florida for a few weeks each winter, will they starve to death while I'm gone? Concerned*

Dear Concerned, Studies have been conducted indicating that birdfeeder availability during the winter in the colder, northern states probably improves the survival rate of chickadees, but overall, birdfeeding does not affect birds' survivability. Because birds have wings, they instinctively forage for food visiting many locations during the day searching for different sources. Birds never become dependent on one source and most studies have shown that birds with easy access to feeders only use them for 20% of their daily rations. If your feeders are empty or you stop feeding, they will seek out other sources. Birds are creatures of habit and remember where they have found food in the past. BG

*Dear BirdGal, I got a new birdfeeder for Christmas but the birds haven't gone near it. What's wrong? -CS*

Dear CS, You first must make sure the birds can see the new feeder as they fly through your yard. Birds do not have a highly developed sense of smell so they locate food by sight. After they have located the feeder and are actively using it, you can move it to an area better for your viewing and they will find it. It might help to sprinkle a little birdseed on top of, underneath and around your new feeder to help the birds locate it. If the new feeder is an addition to a well-established birdfeeding station, you may have to take the old feeder(s) down for a few days to "force" the birds to use the new one. Once they have accepted the new feeder you can put the others back in place. BG

*Dear BirdGal, I used to have lots of goldfinches at my feeder, but lately I haven't seen any. Do they migrate for the winter? Paul*

Dear Paul, No, the American Goldfinch does not leave in the winter; they do, however, change color which is why some people don't recognize them at this time of year. The reason most people stop seeing them at feeders is related to feeder cleanliness...or lack thereof! Check to make sure your finch feeder is clean. If necessary, wash it thoroughly with hot soapy water to which you've added a splash of bleach; rinse it well and allow it to dry completely. Fill the feeder with FRESH nyjer seed (thistle) and watch the finches come flocking back! BG



Dear BirdGal



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## Things to do!

- ✓ Put suet out for insect eating birds—woodpeckers, titmice, nuthatches, chickadees, sapsuckers.
  - ✓ Add fruit to your birdfeeding station this winter to attract mockingbirds, robins, bluebirds, waxwings.
  - ✓ Make grit available to birds to aid in seed digestion—fine sand or crushed egg shells will work.
  - ✓ Get your birdhouses ready for spring: clean them and make any necessary repairs.
  - ✓ If you're going to make nesting boxes for spring, do some research and use the correct box dimensions and hole size for the birds you're trying to attract. Do not put a perch on your bird houses; they are not needed by cavity nesting birds and perches encourage house sparrows.
  - ✓ Start planning your spring planting—don't forget to plant shrubs that produce berries for the wild birds.
  - ✓ Make peanut butter treat for the birds this winter:
 

1 cup peanut butter	1 cup flour
1 cup shortening	4 cups cornmeal
- Mix ingredients to the consistency of cookie dough. Use in suet logs or set out in shallow containers. Bluebirds love it!



## Did you know?

- ? Birds are so numerous that if you stand outside for 10 minutes anywhere in North America during daylight hours you'll see or hear a bird.
- ? If the temperature is close to 0°F, chickadees must consume 60% of their weight every day (the equivalent of more than 250 seeds) just to stay alive; their energy needs are so great in the winter that they can't live much more than a day without food.
- ? Squirrels can live up to 12 years in captivity but their average life span in wild is just 1 year.
- ? Small sparrow sized birds have about 2,000 feathers.
- ? February is National Bird Feeding Month.
- ? The cardinal was the first bird given recognition as a state bird (Kentucky, 1926) and is now the state bird of 7 states including Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana.
- ? The downy woodpecker is so named because of the short, soft feathers around its nostrils.
- ? The Baltimore oriole is a member of the blackbird family.
- ? Longer days trigger birds to start their territorial singing even as early as late winter.