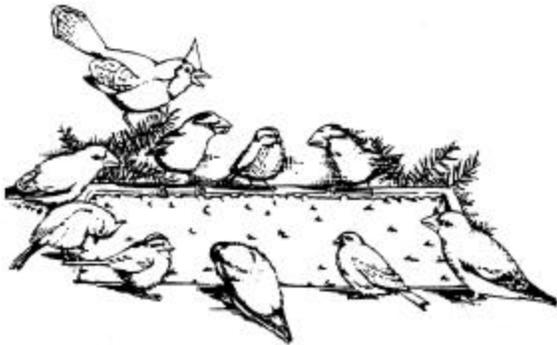




Your Winter Birds: Who They Are, and What to Feed Them

Winter winds whistle around your house and temperatures drop. Many folks move south for the winter to live in milder weather. Many West Virginia birds migrate south, too, taking advantage of warmer temperatures and a southern cuisine with more abundant insects and seeds.



Many familiar summer birds - such as the yellow warbler, red-eyed vireo, northern oriole, chimney swift, barn swallow, crested flycatcher, and even some birds of prey such as the broad-winged hawk-fly south for the winter.

Birds that remain in West Virginia for the winter include many year-round residents such as the red-bellied, downy, and pileated woodpeckers; the barred, screech, and horned owls; and other familiar birds including the northern cardinal, tufted titmouse, bluejay, chickadee, white-breasted nuthatch, and Carolina wren. These year-round residents often are joined during the winter by other birds, such as evening grosbeaks that live in New England during the summer, but may winter in West

Virginia. The tree sparrow, which nests as far north as Alaska, is another northern bird that may be seen in West Virginia during the winter. Flocks of robins that are seen in the woods, and sometimes in the yard, may also be northern birds that are spending the winter in warmer West Virginia.

When you see a winter bird, it is nice to know not only which bird it is, but also where it lives and nests, and whether it is a West Virginia native or a visitor. It is always exciting to see a white-throated sparrow - a common visiting winter bird in West Virginia that nests in Canada.

Ducks, swans, and waterfowl not usually found in West Virginia during the summer can be seen here during the winter. This includes the pied-billed grebe, hooded merganser, scaup duck, and cormorant - birds that are attracted to winter fishing in some of the state's rivers and lakes.

Many people like to attract and feed winter birds and want to know what kinds are at their feeders.

The following birds are frequent visitors to your winter feeders.

Red-bellied Woodpecker

This common large woodpecker has a black-and-white barred back, a gray face, and gray

underparts. The red belly patch, for which the bird is named, varies in size and color intensity and sometimes is difficult to see. In the male, the entire top of the head is red. The female has a red nape and gray crown. Red-bellied woodpeckers live around woods with groves of large trees and eat ants, beetles, berries, grapes, and cherries. These birds are very vocal and can be heard around feeders. They are especially attracted to suet.



Downy Woodpecker

These familiar woodpeckers are patterned in black and white. They have a black cap, black eye stripe, and a small black moustache. Male birds have a red patch on the nape, but females do not. Downy woodpeckers have a call note that sounds like “pik” and a series of “ki ki” notes. They live around woods, gardens, and urban areas. Downy woodpeckers are useful birds because they eat pests such as aphids and insect eggs, as well as spiders, acorns, sap, and berries. They will come to your feeder for suet, cornbread, and peanut butter.



Mourning Dove

Mourning doves are gray-brown. They have small heads and bills, and long, pointed wings. Their tails are long and tapered. There is a black spot on each side of the head, which is visible at close range. The distinctive call is a mournful “who, who, who.” Mourning doves fly swiftly, with a musical whistling of their wings. They live in many different places including woods, rural places and urban areas. They are primarily seedeaters and



consume many weed seeds. Mourning doves usually stay in flocks and may feed on seeds on the ground near your feeders.

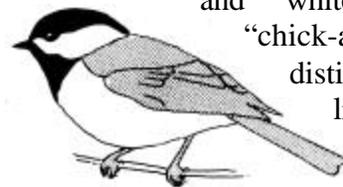
Blue jay

The blue jay is easy to recognize with its prominent blue crest, black-and-white necklace, blue back, and long blue tail. Blue jays are well-known for their repertoire of calls from cries to lispings notes. Blue jays can even imitate hawks. Blue jays live in many places including woods, suburban areas, and backyards. They are eager eaters and consume such items as beetles, spiders, insects, acorns, blueberries, and currants. They will visit your feeder for suet and peanuts.



Chickadee

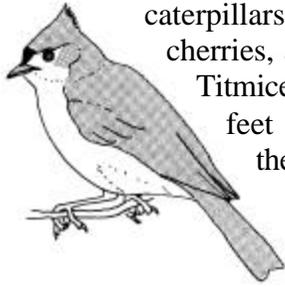
These friendly little birds are easily recognized by their black caps, white bibs, and white cheeks. The “chick-a-dee” call is quite distinct. Chickadees live quite happily either in forests or residential areas where they can become quite tame as feeder birds. They forage on caterpillars, insects eggs, beetles, ants, aphids, and fruit and seeds. Chickadees visit feeders for suet, sunflower seeds, and peanut butter. Two kinds of chickadees, the black-capped and the Carolina chickadee, live in West Virginia. Carolina chickadees live year-round in the state and are a more southern species than the black-capped ones, which nest as far north as Alaska.



Tufted Titmouse

This is one of the most commonly seen birds at feeders. The tufted titmouse has a gray back, white front, and rusty flanks. The crest is large and prominent. Tufted titmice live in

woodlands, city parks, and residential areas. Their loud, distinctive whistle sounds like “peter, peter.” Their varied diet includes caterpillars, beetles, blackberries, cherries, acorns, and beechnuts.



Titmice hold nuts under their feet on a branch and open them with blows of their bill. Titmice come to feeders for suet and bread, and they

will store sunflower seed in their own favorite hiding places, such as a tree cavity.

White-breasted Nuthatch

The white-breasted nuthatch is easy to identify, especially since this stubby-tailed

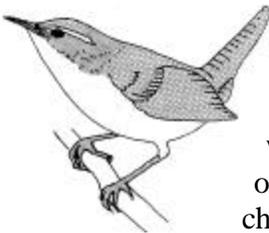


bird often walks down a tree headfirst as it searches bark for insects. This white-breasted bird has a black cap and nape that contrast with the white sides of the face and chest. The call is a loud nasal “yank, yank.”

These birds live around woodlands, parks, and suburban areas. They eat acorns, moths, tent caterpillars, and other insects. Easily tamed, they can be handfed foods such as peanuts and sunflower seeds.

Carolina Wren

Most wrens are quick, active little birds with pointed bills. They often carry their tails cocked over their backs. The Carolina wren is rich red-brown on its back, with a white chin, buffy underparts,



and a distinct white eyestripe. The male may sing throughout the year, and the song sounds like “teakettle, teakettle.” Carolina wrens live in undergrowth near water, woodpiles, and around houses. These wrens eat beetles, moths, cockroaches, spiders, and some berries and seeds. Carolina wrens are

a southern species of bird and can be killed off during especially severe West Virginia winters. These bustling, bright little wrens will come to feeders for seeds.

Northern Cardinal

West Virginia’s state bird is unmistakable with his brilliant scarlet color, red crest, and black patch of feathers at the base of his thick red bill. The olive-gray female has a pink bill and reddish tinge on her wings, face, tail, and crest.



Cardinals have a variety of songs and sing throughout the year; even the female sings. Cardinals live in residential areas and places where there are thickets and bushy cover. Cardinals eat aphids, beetles, cutworms, corn, oats, and weed seeds. They readily come to feeders for sunflower seeds.

Song Sparrow

This is one of the most common sparrows in West Virginia. Adults have brown backs and tails, with heavily streaked whitish underparts. There is a noticeable dark central spot on the breast. Song

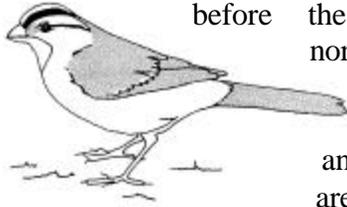


sparrows prefer places with brushy cover and streams, but they frequently visit yards and gardens. They eat beetles, flies, ants, weed seeds, grain, and fruit. They will come to a feeder for seeds.

White-throated Sparrow

This very distinctive looking sparrow has a gray breast with a prominent white throat patch and a prominent yellow patch between the bill and the eyes. There are stripes on the head, which may be black and white or brown and tan. The white-throated sparrow actually nests from Canada to the Yukon

and is a winter visitor in West Virginia. This sparrow can be heard singing its familiar “old sam peabody” song into April before the bird migrates north. These



sparrows eat fruit, weed seeds, and insects. They are common visitors at feeders, especially if the weather is bad. They like sunflower seeds.

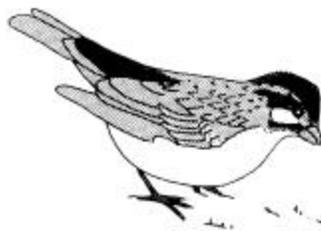
Dark-eyed Junco

Sometimes called a “snowbird,” the junco is overall slate gray, with a very conspicuous white bill, belly, and outer tail feathers. Juncos live in woods and clearings during winter and may visit gardens, parks, and feeders. Juncos, which usually live in flocks, feed mostly on the ground, scratching for seeds and insects. Juncos are not considered migratory in West Virginia where they nest at higher elevations including Canaan Valley, but move to warmer areas of the state during the winter.



Purple Finch

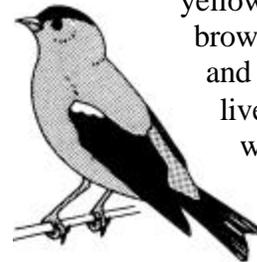
The male purple finch has a raspberry-colored head, throat, and breast with whitish underparts. The back is streaked with brown and red. The female is brown with white streaked underparts. These finches are often seen in small flocks in the tops of evergreen trees such as Norway spruce. Purple finches eat mostly seeds, but they also eat fruit, beetles, and birch and maple buds. They will visit your feeder for seeds. Another common finch that visits the feeder is the house finch. It looks like the purple finch, except the purple color on the house finch is brighter than the raspberry of



the purple finch. House finches, which now live throughout West Virginia, originally came from California.

American Goldfinch

In winter, goldfinches have a much more muted plumage than their familiar summer yellow. Winter birds are olive brown with yellowish heads and black wings. Goldfinches live along streams, and in woods and parklike areas.



They like seeds of thistle, conifers, asters, and dandelions. These communal birds are often seen in flocks. They will come to feeders for sunflower seeds.

Evening Grosbeak

The evening grosbeak is unmistakable with its conical, chalky yellow bill, black wings with a large conspicuous white wing patch, yellow forehead, and brown rump and belly. These birds nest from Canada to New England and winter in the southern states. They may be found anywhere in West Virginia during the winter months in flocks from a dozen to a hundred birds. Evening grosbeaks will gobble up sunflower seeds.



House Sparrow

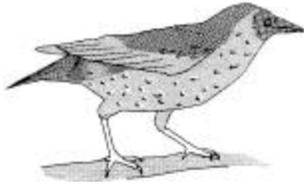
This bird was introduced into America from Europe. It is not a sparrow, but belongs to a bird family called weavers, because some members of this bird group weave complex nests. House sparrows are highly adaptable, thrive in urban areas and often compete with our native bluebirds for nesting sites. The male house sparrow has a



black throat and upper breast. Females are brown. House sparrows often come to feeders in flocks. They are especially attracted to bread.

European Starling

The starling is another bird introduced from Europe. In winter, the bird is streaked black. By spring the bird has acquired its spring plumage, which is iridescent black. In spring, the starling's bill is bright yellow. Starlings are so named because they somewhat resembles the outline of a star in flight. In winter, flocks of starlings may number in the hundreds. Starlings are frequent visitors at feeders, especially in urban areas. They are attracted to cracked corn.



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Banquets for Your Winter Birds

Whether the winter birds you see are West Virginia residents or guests from far away, you want to provide the right food for the birds at the right time and serve it in a safe place at a suitable location.

Here are some frequently asked questions and answers about feeding your winter birds.

When's the best time to start feeding birds?

There isn't any best time, as birds appreciate a handout throughout the year, especially during severe weather. However, the sooner the winter feeders are out - September is not too early - the sooner the birds can find them and you can enjoy watching the birds. Don't forget that it may take a while for birds to find the feeders. You must take the time to select appropriate feeders for the birds and not just throw feed on the ground, where it can be contaminated by dampness, mold,

and pesticides, and attract unwanted pests and rodents.

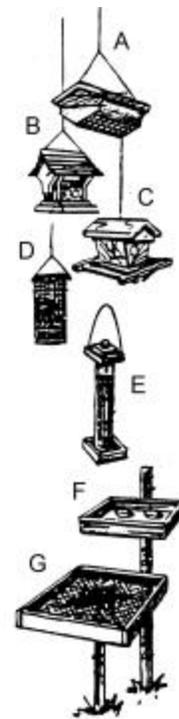
What's the best feeder location?

That depends on where you want to watch your birds - from your window, the patio, or other places. Pick a location that has easy access for you so the feeders can be refilled in cold weather. Select a place where discarded seed shells and bird droppings won't be a cleanup problem. Place your feeders out of reach of the neighborhood cats.

What kind of feeders should I get?

As the following illustrations show, there are many types of feeders you can use, from a tube feeder to a simple platform feeder:

- starling-resistant suet feeder
- house feeder for sunflower seeds
- bluebird feeder (bluebirds live in West Virginia all year-round but you need to live where the bluebirds do - around meadows and wooded areas - or you won't see the birds.)
- wire mesh cage feeder for peanuts
- tube feeder for thistle or black sunflower seed
- tray fruit feeder
- platform feeder



Different feeders and the type of food you put in them attract different kinds of birds. The most effective way to attract a large variety of birds to your yard is to put out separate feeders for each of your banquets for the birds.

Suet feeders attract:

woodpeckers	chickadees
wrens	nuthatches
cardinals	doves
goldfinches	

Peanut butter suet attracts:

woodpeckers	juncos
goldfinches	jays
cardinals	bluebirds

House feeders (or similar feeders) with sunflower seeds attract many kinds of seed-eating birds including:

cardinals	finches
nuthatches	titmice
grosbeaks	sparrows
chickadees	

Peanut feeders attract:

woodpeckers	chickadees
titmice	

A tube feeder (which provides a space so the smaller birds can get at the feed) with thistle (niger seed) or black sunflower seed will attract:

woodpeckers	titmice
finches	nuthatches
sparrows	juncos

A tray feeder with fruit will attract:

woodpeckers	starlings
bluebirds	cardinals
jays	

cedar waxings - They are year-round residents in West Virginia, but count yourself lucky if you see them at your feeders.

Mockingbirds - These birds also live in West Virginia during the winter, but are not always as commonly seen other feeder birds.

Platform feeders with sunflower seed attract:

cardinals	nuthatches
mourning doves	woodpeckers
purple finches	titmice
house finches	chickadees
song sparrows	goldfinches
evening grosbeaks	jays
white-throated sparrows	

They also attract other seed-eating birds in the neighborhood, including crossbills, pine siskins, and white-crowned sparrows, which are more unusual birds to find at your feeders.

Different species of birds will feed together at a platform feeder, although the larger birds such as blue jays and cardinals may chase the smaller chickadees and goldfinches.

Providing several types of feeders should suffice to keep your birds well-fed. Removing perches from tube feeders means only those birds that can cling - such as finches, chickadees, titmice, and woodpeckers - can feed.

If you don't want to buy feeders, you can make your own. You can also make inexpensive feeders by cutting out the sides of plastic jugs and bottles and using them for feeders. Remember the feeders should be durable and easy to clean.

What's for Dinner?

The kind of banquet you offer the birds determines what kinds of birds you get. As a general rule, black oil sunflower seeds are the preference of birds that visit tube and platform feeders.

The following are the most common kinds of seeds used in feeders:

Black oil sunflower seed: These seeds are rich in oil, and their small size makes them easier for small birds such as chickadees to

eat. They are readily devoured by most seed-eating birds that visit feeders.

Striped sunflower seed: This is a nutritionally rich seed for birds with heavy bills such as the cardinal and evening grosbeak.

Hulled sunflower seed: This seed is attractive to smaller birds and avoids waste because of the discarded hulls. However, these seeds can rot in wet weather.

Birdseed mix: There are many birdseed mixes available. They include sunflower seeds and other grains such as milo, rice, oats, corn, and wheat. Starlings, often a nuisance at your feeder, prefer milo, hulled oats, and corn, so you may not want to use them.

White proso millet: Red and white millet are available, but birds often prefer the white kind. Because of its hard seed coat, millet is less likely to swell and rot than other birdseeds.

Safflower seed: This is best known as seed for cardinals. It has one advantage in that gray squirrels, often a nuisance at feeders, usually don't eat it.

Shelled peanuts: Shelled peanuts attract birds. Since starlings especially like them, so the peanuts may attract starlings to your feeder.

Fresh and dried corn: Cracked corn attracts ground-feeding birds and ducks, but it rots quickly if it gets wet. It attracts squirrels, pigeons, blackbirds, and house sparrows.

Thistle or niger seed: This seed from Africa is a favorite of small finches. The small seeds are often placed in a tube feeder to prevent spillage. These seeds are high in protein. They are not related to the familiar weed known as thistle.

Suet cakes: Suet and suet cakes are favorite winter treats that provide an important source of fat for winter birds. Suet is hard beef fat - the best is from beef kidneys. You can purchase this at your meat market, then cut it into small chunks, melt it in a heavy pan over low heat, and pour the rendered suet into a small mold and put it in your refrigerator to harden. The cooking or rendering kills bacteria in the suet, which can then hang in your suet feeders. In cold weather, and if there is no danger of fresh suet becoming rancid, you can hang it out without rendering. Birds will devour it. You can also purchase rendered suet cakes from a birdseed store.

Cleanliness

To reduce the possibility of spreading avian disease, you should keep the feeders clean and always dispose of moldy food.

- Clean feeders with soap and water before you set them out.
- Clean feeders when they become wet and seeds stick to them.
- Clean any feeder when you suspect the food has spoiled.
- If you notice sick birds around your feeders, discontinue feeding for a few days.
- Piles of discarded husks under the feeders may attract small mammals such as mice and rats. Keep areas around feeders clean.

Unwanted Guests at Your Feeders

Once you supply regular banquets to your birds, you may run into problems with uninvited visitors. These visitors fall into two categories - those interested in the food, such as squirrels, raccoons, opossums, rats, and those interested in a bird for dinner - cats and hawks. To discourage climbers such as squirrels, you may need to mount feeders on a slippery pole the critters can't climb. Feeders hung in trees provide ready

access for agile climbers such as squirrels and raccoons. Pests such as rats and mice can be discouraged by cleaning up food waste and storing feed in metal cans. Cats are a problem around feeders. Ground-feeding birds such as juncos and sparrows are especially vulnerable to cat predation. Hawks, especially Cooper's hawks, sometimes find that feeders provide a ready meal. Hawks are a part of nature, so you don't want to do anything about a hawk. If you have a problem with too many local pigeons or rock doves, remember that Cooper's hawks find rock doves an especially tasty meal.

Enjoying Your Birds

You may want to keep a bird guide handy to help identify birds that come to winter feeders. It is quite possible that your feeders could attract other kinds of winter birds not often seen, including white-winged crossbills, redpolls, pine siskins, and white-crowned sparrows.



Don't forget that even in winter, birds need water. A birdbath with fresh unfrozen water will prove attractive to many of your winter visitors. If you live in a place where you can construct a small pond, you may even attract waterfowl including the ring-necked duck, black duck, wood duck, hooded merganser, and perhaps migrating green-and blue-winged teals.

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