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## Taking Care of our Local Birds During Winter

By Karen Mayne

***The holiday season is here, so how about giving songbirds a holiday treat, too? Many bird species migrate to the Caribbean, Mexico, or South America for the winter, but a number of birds stay in the U.S. Most songbirds eat insects and spiders during the summer, but in winter they must switch to seeds and fruits. We can make sure our local songbirds "hang around" our yards by putting out birdfeeders.***

The holiday season is here, so how about giving songbirds a holiday treat, too? Many bird species migrate to the Caribbean, Mexico, or South America for the winter, but a number of birds stay in the U.S. Most songbirds eat insects and spiders during the summer, but in winter they must switch to seeds and fruits. We can make sure our local songbirds hang around our yards by putting out birdfeeders.

Virginia is a great location for seeing winter birds, since many of the songbirds that nest in New England move to Virginia for the winter. Some of the most common winter songbirds in our area include the cardinal, blue jay, junco, tufted titmouse, and downy woodpecker, as well as several species of chickadees, wrens, nuthatches, and sparrows. One little bird, the house finch, is often confused with sparrows. If you see a sparrow-sized bird whose head looks like it's been dipped in raspberry jam, you know you are looking at a male house finch.

There are many types of birdfeeders and bird seed, and a variety of both will attract the most birds. Hopper feeders hold a lot of seed, but tube type feeders are better for attracting smaller birds. Black oil sunflower seed attracts the most variety of birds. Be careful of cheap mixed bird feed since it contains milo, a seed that few birds will eat.

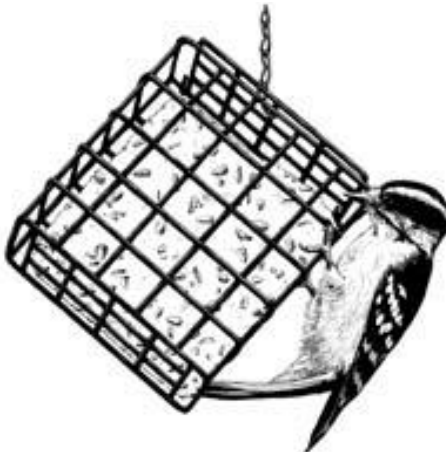
Suet feeders are wire baskets that can be hung from trees or poles to attract woodpeckers. Even peanut

butter can be smeared on a tree trunk or put on a pinecone to hang from a tree limb. Clean feeders regularly by emptying debris and washing them to prevent mold and bacteria from sickening the birds. Birds need water all winter, so keeping a freeze-proof container on the ground is important.



Feeding and watching birds is a great way to introduce kids and grandkids to the natural world. All they need to get started are a bird identification book and a cheap pair of binoculars (did I mention it's the holiday season?). The *Celebrate Urban Birds* program (607-254-2123 or [www.CelebrateUrbanBirds.org](http://www.CelebrateUrbanBirds.org)) is a good place to learn about bird feeding and watching (and what to do about those pesky squirrels). This website has links to two other citizen scientist programs that enlist adults, kids, and groups like scouts

and schools to help scientists learn more about urban birds. *Project Feeder Watch* ([www.FeederWatch.org](http://www.FeederWatch.org)) runs until April 6, 2012 and lets citizens enter data on the birds they see at their birdfeeders. The *Great Backyard Bird Count* ([www.birdsource.org/gbbc](http://www.birdsource.org/gbbc)) will be February 17 - 20, 2012, and will use citizen observations to take a snapshot of where birds are across the continent.



If you really want to help urban birds and other wildlife, the National Wildlife Federation's *Certified Wildlife Habitat* program ([www.nwf.org/backyard](http://www.nwf.org/backyard)) provides homeowners with information on how to make your property inviting to wildlife by providing sources of food, water, and shelter. Many of our native trees, such as dogwood, American holly, serviceberry, oaks, and Eastern red cedar are good sources of food for birds and other wildlife.

So brighten the dreary days of winter by looking out your windows to a feast for the eyes - our beautiful winter birds!

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