



http://www.oswegocountynewsnow.com/oswego_county_homes/advice-for-homeowners-to-enjoy-birds-during-winter-months/article_872b66b6-bff5-11e7-b8eb-9b55e3d874e6.html

Advice for homeowners to enjoy birds during winter months

By Lexie Kwiek lexie@fultonvalleynews.com Nov 2, 2017 Updated Nov 5, 2017



A downy woodpecker stops by a bird feeder for a meal. Local experts say that homeowners in Oswego County can enjoy many types of bird species year-round.
Dick Drosse photo

A true sign of winter's approach is the honking of Canadian geese as they head to warmer weather in their v-formation, leaving in their wake the feathered friends who choose to stick out the cold months in our backyards.

While the sound of birds chirping is typically associated with springtime, homeowners can enjoy many types of bird species year-round in Oswego County.

Bernie Carr, president and principal environmental scientist of Terrestrial Environmental Specialists, Inc., said local residents can expect to see the black-backed chickadee, white-breasted nuthatch, house finch, house sparrow, white-throated sparrow, dark-eyed junco, American cardinal, and American blue jay, just to name a few.

To attract wildlife during winter months, many homeowners first think of providing animals with shelter from inevitable snowfall. According to Carr, birdhouses are not necessary during cold months. They are most useful in the spring and summer when birds are looking for nesting locations. In the winter, he said birds easily find refuge in nearby vegetation.

"They'll roost in conifers or they'll roost at night in dense shrubs," said Carr.

Since birds prefer these natural sources of shelter during the winter, homeowners should focus on offering organic resting places rather than buying fabricated birdhouses.

Brenda Caster, a nature columnist for The Valley News, follows this method after turning to "native landscaping" about a year ago. In September 2016 she lost seven trees on her property in a microburst storm. Since then she has been replanting only native trees and keeps her yard closer to a natural state by mowing less and preserving more.

Instead of fully removing one dead tree from her property, Caster decided to only cut it down far enough to prevent it from ever causing damage to the house. She left the trunk and branches and said the tree has harbored food for the wild birds and offered shelter to many living creatures.

"The trunk is covered in holes from woodpeckers," said Caster. She also believes squirrels may have built nests inside the tree.

Caster also recommends building a brush pile on your property if there is enough space. Her pile has items like tomato vines from the garden and an old Christmas tree.

"It makes a good place for rabbits or small animals to find shelter," said Caster.

Since birds instinctually find their own shelter in brush and branches, homeowners should focus on attracting them by providing nutritious food.

Caster again follows the natural method of providing food to backyard birds by leaving all remnants of summer flowers standing tall through the fall and winter months.

"Birds will peck out their seeds through the winter," said Caster.

She also stressed the importance of not mowing down goldenrod stalks. Caster said the hard, round knobs that form toward the top of a goldenrod plant contain a type of worm. When temperatures drop, birds will peck through the plant to eat the protein-filled grub.

Along with goldenrod she said finches in particular enjoy her tall sunflowers, and her raspberry bushes provide dried fruit to other birds and four-legged yard dwellers.

"It's fun to think about how many critters we are feeding on the ground from fallen fruit," said Caster.

For homeowners looking to invest in manufactured birdfeeders, ornithologist Gerry Smith said the brand and style should be determined by each person's budget.

He said Droll Yankee feeders are "top of the line," but can cost anywhere from \$75 to \$100. He recommends visiting Wild Birds Unlimited in DeWitt or conducting your own research online to find the feeder that's best for you.

The two main types of feeders people choose from are those that hang from trees or platform feeders, which offer seed to birds on a wide, flat surface. Smith warns that platform feeders are the easiest targets for squirrels.

"Squirrels are talented at getting a free meal," said Smith. "There is no such thing as a squirrel-proof feeder."

While there is no way to completely repel squirrels, there are certain types of food that will attract more birds. Smith said mourning doves like cracked corn, while woodpeckers will eat suet blocks from hanging feeders.

"Every yard is different," said Smith. "People are going to get different results."

Overall, all three bird experts recommend using black oil sunflower seeds, which are different from the sunflower seeds people enjoy as a snack.

"It's like eating peanuts for you," said Carr. "It's high energy food."

Carr said investing in black oil sunflower seeds may seem more expensive than buying a bag of mixed seed, but in the end it is more cost effective because there is less waste.

"Stay away from mixed bird seeds," said Smith. He explained the songbird blends found in most stores often contain types of millet that many wild birds won't eat.

Along with keeping them full, homeowners should be aware of the overall cleanliness of birdfeeders.

"Open feeders can collect bird excrement, which can harbor bacteria and make birds sick," said Smith. "Tube feeders don't get contaminated in the same way."

Carr recommends cleaning out all bird feeders on a fairly regular basis, especially if there is a chance that seed has collected moisture. Wet bird food will grow fungus and diseases that can infect birds.

While some homeowners may feel personally responsible for taking care of their backyard friends, Smith said wild birds will enjoy the food put out by humans but are also capable of finding nutrients elsewhere.

"Bird feeding is for people," said Smith. "Only during the coldest months do (birds) depend on it."

If homeowners want to help wild birds by feeding them during the winter months, Smith warns them to take the commitment seriously.

"If you start feeding birds in mid-November, you must continue until at least mid-March," said Smith. "Birds will depend on your feeder through the cold months."

If homeowners want to learn more about the feathered wildlife that inhabit their yard, they can take advantage of SUNY Oswego's Winter Bird Study program.

SUNY Oswego's Rice Creek Field Station holds Winter Bird Study sessions most Saturdays from November through March. The SUNY Oswego website describes the study as the chance to "be a citizen scientist as you survey the birds at the Rice Creek feeders from our indoor viewing area." These events are open to all ages and do not require any prior experience to participate.

The first Winter Bird Study session is taking place today from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. To learn how to get involved with the Rice Creek Field Station, contact Diann Jackson, PhD at diann.jackson@oswego.edu or visit www.oswego.edu/rice-creek.