

Feeding Birds in Winter

By Doris Ivory, *Naturalist at the Eagle River Nature Center, Eagle River, AK*

Winter in Alaska is not an easy time for birds. Snow and ice limit natural food sources. Cold temperatures require a high energy output to stay warm. Most birds cannot find enough food and are not adapted to dealing with frigid temperatures. A majority of the approximately 470 summer resident birds here migrate south to warmer climates for the winter.

There are some hardy, well adapted species of birds that are permanent, year round Alaskan residents. Diverse in form, color and habits, Alaska's winter birds are fascinating and fun to watch. But their secretive habits and low numbers during the short, frigid winter days make outdoor winter bird watching difficult. Cold binoculars and frozen fingers don't work very well either. There is a better way to enjoy many of our winter resident birds. Bird feeding is a delightful and effective way of attracting winter birds to areas where their beauty and activities can be enjoyed at close range. With some effort, money, and fore thought, you can enjoy the birds of winter in the comfort of your home.

Before you start winter bird feeding, ask yourself if you are willing to make the commitment of effort and money for the whole winter. Consider the cost of bird feed. Check out bird feed prices and calculate how much you want to spend per month and how involved you want to be so you will be prepared. Once you start feeding birds and get them accustomed to finding food at your feeders, you must continue to feed them until spring. They will come to rely on the feed you provide. Particularly during harsh weather, forcing birds to expend energy searching out other areas of food can be a death sentence for them. Once you have established a feeder, be sure to fill it regularly and have someone fill it for you if you are away.

Bird feeders can be bought or made at home. A large variety of small to large feeders can be purchased at variety stores such as WalMart or Fred Meyer. A homemade feeder can be as simple as a tray cut from a milk carton or large plastic bottle with string or wire attached to hang from a tree. Lots of designs, from simple to complex, can be found in books or on the Internet. Or you can come up with your own design. Use your imagination to design feeders that match the landscape and architecture of your home.

When deciding what to feed, remember that birds need fat, carbohydrates, and proteins. But winter Alaskan birds primarily need fat. One gram of fat has twice the calories of either proteins or carbohydrates. The most desirable three sources of fats for our birds are suet, peanut butter, and sunflower seeds. You can buy pre-prepared suet blocks that fit neatly into hanging wire holders. Or you can purchase animal fat



suet for a minimal cost at grocery stores. Place this in wire or mesh type holder or bag. The plastic mesh bags that potatoes, fruits, and onions come in work well. Peanut butter's sticky consistency occasionally causes problems for birds, so it should be mixed with

...ask yourself if you're willing to make the commitment...

other feed such as cornmeal, rolled oats, grits, nuts, seeds, crushed egg shells, or pieces of fruit. For seed feeding, buy Black Oil sunflower seeds. Alaskan birds love them. They are high in fat and protein, easy to crack open, and the best seeds nutritionally to feed birds in the frigid north. Don't buy bags of pre-mixed birdseed. They contain a lot of filler, such as millet, which has no fat. Pieces of fruit, cracked peanuts, grains, nuts and seeds are good supplemental feed for birds also. Birds use grit in their digestion since they don't have teeth, so some coarse sand or gravel added to feeders will attract birds in need of this. To watch a wide variety of birds, put out multiple feeders in your backyard filled with different seeds, fruits, and suet. Bird feeders do need to be cleaned periodically with a 5 to 10 percent solution of chlorine bleach water. Rinse thoroughly and wait till they are dry to refill. Keep your bird feed dry and free of mold.

A large part of bird feeding success is determined by where you locate your feeder. You should put feeders where the birds can easily be seen and enjoyed. Before you decide where to place your feeders, remember that birds need protection from wind and predators, and perches to use while eating. A feeder with no trees, shrubs or plants around rarely has birds on it, because it offers no escape cover

(continued on next page)

from aerial or mammal predators. Cover vegetation should be located close enough (within 15 to 20 feet) to bird feeders to provide quick protection, yet far enough away so they do not provide “ambush sites” for cats and other predators. Trees, particularly dense spruce trees, also provide a good night time nesting spot with easy access to food in daylight. If your feeder is near a window, alter the appearance of the glass to help reduce window collisions. Birds fly into the window because they see the reflection of the trees or vegetation. To help break up the reflection, try putting hawk silhouettes or other decals on the window, painting a scene on the windows exterior with soap, covering windows with a fine plastic garden netting, or hanging a wind chime or strips of aluminum foil or colored ribbon outside the window. If you find a bird has hit a window, carefully pick it up and put it in a box or large paper bag. Put it in a dark, quiet corner of your house for an hour or so. If the bird recovers, take the bag or box outside and just let it go. If the bird comes to, but seems injured, call the Bird Treatment and Learning Center at 562-4852 for help.

Alaskans have realized in recent years that bird feeders are serious bear attractants. Wildlife biologists recommend people quit feeding birds in mid April, as bears are starting to emerge from their dens. Bears will eat anything birds will eat at a feeder. Put feeders away and thoroughly clean up bird feeding areas. No matter how high or protected you may think your feeder is, a bear will almost always find a way to get into it. Bears don't just like to eat things; they like to investigate and manipulate things. They'll tear down an empty feeder and investigate empty boxes. If they do find food, it's a reward and increases the chances they'll return and become a dangerous problem. Besides, it's not necessary to feed birds in the spring, summer, and early fall as they have plenty of natural foods available. Replacing feeders with nest boxes and birdbaths is a good way to enjoy birds during the warmer months. In the fall, wait until early November to begin feeding again.

When starting a feeder program, be patient. It may take as long as several weeks before birds discover your feeders. By setting up bird feeders in winter, you are providing a generous, reliable source of food. The birds will gladly come and help themselves where it is convenient to watch and enjoy them. Once you have discovered the joys and wonder of birds, we hope you will consider joining in the fun of observing and counting birds in the Chugiak-Eagle River area during the Audubon Annual Bird Count on Sunday December 27. This annual event provides scientists with valuable data on the health of bird populations and our ecosystems. Check the program schedule at our website www.ernc.org or call 694-2108 for more information.