

Wintering Birds – Peter and Deana Gadd - M.L. October 19, 2010

Winter often offers beauty in the sculptured shapes of snow drifts and the heavily laden branches of the evergreen trees, certainly at times very quiet and restful scenes. But at times these views are so lifeless with much of nature's activity either dormant or taking place under the snow cover. Perhaps that is why so many of us enjoy stocking feeders to attract visits from the birds that stay here to share the wonders of our winter, although at times perhaps they don't see it quite that way!

There is a pleasing diversity of winter hangers-on, everything from the Black-capped Chickadee and Junco, to the Purple Finch and noisy Blue Jay amongst others. Different species of course have different preferences in food and the manner in which it is served. Juncos and Mourning Doves seem to want to feel they have found their own nutritional sustenance by hunting and pecking for seed that lies on a flat surface such as a platform or patio deck. Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers too enjoy eating suet as though they were perched on a dead tree feeding on insects' nests. Finches are quite content to feed from a silo type of suspended metal or plastic feeder fighting for a perch perhaps with the seemingly joyful chickadee.

Regardless of the manner in which a meal is served or what is on the menu, the feeding of birds through the winter can be very beneficial for "our feathered friends" and to us who enjoy their colourful, active and often interesting feeding frenzy.

But if we are not careful our good intentions can create a deathly trap for these warm-blooded creatures that are only trying to supply fuel to their tiny furnaces to keep themselves from freezing to death.

Windows reflecting a blue sky can be very misleading, inviting neck breaking collisions; stale, wet, rotting seeds can be poisonous; and then there are predators such neighbourhood cats “hard wired” to hunt and predatory birds looking to snatch an off-guard live meal. We have seen a Northern Shrike dining at our feeders on two occasions, not to enjoy our bird seed but those feasting off it; in one instance a Junco, and another, a Chickadee. Of course such events are very much a part of nature and it is interesting to see the “wild” from the warmth of our living room!



Hairy Woodpecker eating peanuts



Mourning Doves foraging in snow for seed

There are other creatures of the wild that of course are attracted to “free” food such as the red, grey and even flying squirrels as well as pigeons. These visitors are often not so welcome and can be discouraged through the use of such devices as spring loaded feeders and the odd “shoo – you”! These so called “moochers” are living in the winter elements too and perhaps deserve some sympathy, although I know there are many who don’t agree.

It seems that the most popular bird feed to offer through the winter is black oil sunflower seed available at most grocery and hardware stores. It is cheaper of course to buy in bulk by the sack. Other food sold for birds are nyjer seed and mixed seed that might include

safflower seed, white millet, corn kernels as well as sunflower seeds. Birds also appreciate the opportunity to drink water if it can be made available in the liquid form!



Blue Jay drinking thawed water



Grey Squirrel "Mooching"

Project Feeder Watch is a survey run by **Bird Studies Canada** that encourages people who feed birds through the winter to record, by use of spot-checks, the number of visitors to their feeders two days each week. This is in order to monitor bird population trends in the country. Bird Studies Canada is a national, non-profit, conservation-minded organization. To get involved with this survey you must become a member of Bird Studies Canada (\$35.00) which you can do by visiting their very informative web site at www.bsc-eoc.org . There are at this site many useful tips for backyard bird feeding