



WINTER TWEETS

Snowbirds, to me are not retired people in big RVs headed south on I-5. Snowbirds to me are the little black headed Juncos pecking away at the seed heads of my dead perennials or the little song sparrows' sitting in a snow covered bush, feathers plumped against the cold. Most birds do fly south for the winter, seeking a more reliable food supply. A surprising number of birds however, are able to find enough to eat here that they make our backyards home in winter, too. We can make a more comfortable winter home for our feathered guests with a few thoughtful additions to our backyards and maybe a feeder or two.

Birds need shelter from winter cold and cover from hungry predators. Evergreen trees and shrubs offer both shelter and cover and nearly every backyard has some. Consider starting a brush pile for your birds in some out of the way spot. Throw on your old Christmas tree, add blown down branches from the last storm, winter prunings and dead ornamental grass stalks. This small step will give good shelter and deep cover for Towhees, Juncos and Varied Thrushes, and can also provide insects for food as the plants decay.

Fruiting plants are another good addition to your winter wildlife landscape and many are beautiful in bloom, too. Robins, Cedar Waxwings and other fruit eating birds will search out mountain ash, pyracantha berries, rosehips and crabapples. Don't be too eager to clean up in the fall! Seed heads from vegetables and flowers are greedily devoured when the ground is frozen. Upright sedums have been the "beak down" favorite in my wildlife garden with flocks of finches and juncos.

Of course anyone who enjoys the backyard birds is going to want to hang a feeder. When choosing a feeder, ask yourself these questions... Is it easy to clean? Will the seed stay dry? Is it squirrel proof? Consider choosing one that limits the size of the bird and number of birds feeding at one time. There are many feeders on the market, spend some money and get a good sturdy well built feeder. It will give you and your birds many seasons of enjoyment.

Now the feeder is purchased and hung on its pole,(out of reach of raccoons, hopefully). What do we put in it? Different birds eat different types of seed so you could try a 'waste not' mix or just go to black

oil sunflower seed. This seems to be a favorite of most birds. Avoid bargain mixes, birds pick through the filler seed and make a big mess under the feeder with the discarded seed. Rats love it.

Many insect eating birds that hang around all year will eat seeds too, but setting out a suet feeder will make you more popular with this crowd. Chickadees, Nuthatches, Flickers and woodpeckers will go after this protein treat. Suet typically comes in blocks and then is placed in a rectangular cage type feeder. I like the sunflower or peanut butter suet mixes. Flocks of bushtits will hang on a suet feeder, several at a time! If you have problems with starlings, you may have to get a double caged one.

After a meal a bird may need to have a drink or take a bath. Keep your birdbath from freezing by using a birdbath heater, available at a bird feeding store or over the internet. Make sure to use an exterior extension cord to connect with power.

If you feed birds only in winter, get your feeders out by mid-October and don't take them down until the end of April. While birds are usually not dependant on feeders for survival, a feeder kept up and stocked in severe winter weather, or even a cold, wet spring can make a difference. Also, keep your feeder, seed and birdbath clean! Be aware that birds can spread disease among themselves. You don't want to be Sam an' Ellas' café!

One last chirp... keep a pair of binoculars and a bird book handy in a drawer by your window. See who you can find coming for a visit! I highly recommend '[Birds of the Puget Sound Region](#)' by Morse, Avarsa and Opperman. It's very easy to use.