



THE BACKYARD NEWSLETTER

FEBRUARY 2023

NATIONAL BIRD FEEDING MONTH



RAPTORS IN THE BACKYARD

Have your backyard bird feeders suddenly gone eerily quiet and you aren't sure why? There's a good possibility that a raptor has visited your backyard. During February and March, and again in September, we receive more reports of raptors in backyards than any other time of year.

The first sign that you may have a predator nearby is your birds vanishing from sight, and your yard going quiet. Even just the shadow or silhouette of a hawk or other raptor flying overhead can spook the birds into quiet stillness. If there's a predator still nearby, you may notice a bird or group of birds making single note alarm calls constantly. Usually, this means that your backyard birds are trying to harass the predator and make them leave. If you notice any of these signs, check around and see if you can spot the raptor perched in a tree or on a fence waiting for prey. Raptor species that are common in backyards include Cooper's Hawks, Sharp-shinned Hawks, and Merlins.

Sharp-shinned Hawks are small, about 12 inches from head to tail. Adult Sharp-shinned have an orange coloured chest with a horizontal pattern, dark gray back and a black cap. Their tail is flat at the end with squared corners. Sharp-shinned Hawks are easily identified by how they hunt. As the prey flies into bushes, other hawks will land and walk in after them, but the Sharp-shinned Hawk will dive right in after their prey.

Cooper's Hawks are very similar in colouring to Sharp-shinned and they are sometimes confused for each other. Cooper's Hawks are larger, around 16-18 inches in size, with a rounded tail. The tail shape can help to identify the difference between the Cooper's and Sharp-shinned Hawks.

The Merlin is a small falcon about 10-12 inches in size.

They have a dark blue gray back, a streaked chest, and a black mustache. To identify a Merlin in flight, watch the wings. They have a very fast wing beat, and like to attack in open areas so they can approach quickly to surprise prey. One difference between the Merlin and the Sharp-shinned hawk is the shape of the wings. A falcon has a swept back, pointed wing where a hawk has a straight wing that is rounded at the end.

It is a unique opportunity to watch and observe a raptor in the backyard, although it may not be what you wanted to attract with the bird feeder.

MERLIN



BEGINNER TIPS FOR IDENTIFYING SHARP-SHINNED AND COOPER'S HAWKS



SHARP-SHINNED (LEFT) VS COOPER'S (RIGHT) HAWKS

COOPER'S

Approximately crow-sized
large head in comparison to body
nape feathers are lighter and gives head a capped appearance
look more proportional when flying
tail is rounded

SHARP-SHINNED

Approximately jay-sized
small, rounded head
nape feathers are same blue-gray
look unbalanced when flying, head barely projects beyond the wings
tail is flat or square



NESTING

Spring is coming and everyone is looking forward to it, even the birds. Spring is a busy time for our backyard birds as they begin moving to find a suitable territory for nesting. Providing nest boxes, especially in areas lacking in natural habitats, can help make it easier for them during this time. Now is a great opportunity to get a nest box set up and ready for some new tenants.

While not all birds use nest boxes, some common backyard cavity nesters include chickadees, wrens, nuthatches, swallows, and woodpeckers. There are a few requirements for nest boxes to be beneficial. The entrance hole diameter determines who can get in, and making it too big can allow predators easy entrance. The floor size of the box impacts how much work and energy the birds will use to build the nest. Other important things to think about include ventilation, and a way to easily clean the box after nesting is done.

When placing your nest box try and keep it out of direct sun, especially afternoon sun, and don't paint it dark colours to avoid the birds overheating. Don't hide the nest box or bury it deep in branches as that makes it hard for birds to find it. Some bird species like chickadees will use boxes near trees or shrubs so they can duck in and out without being spotted. Other birds like swallows prefer an open area around the box so they can swoop in and out. Make sure your box is easy to access for cleaning, and somewhere you can enjoy watching the birds.



Collect some nesting material like moss, cattail down, dry grasses and place in a suet cage. Hang this away from the nest box to provide some nesting material for birds. Do not use dryer lint as the fine dust and chemicals can be harmful.

All our nest boxes are made with western red cedar. The door hinges up for easy cleaning and has a 'ladder' on the inside to help the young climb out when ready. We carry nest boxes for most common cavity nesting birds.



CHOOSING THE RIGHT SEED FOR YOUR FEEDER



May 09, 2017

WHY USE SUET?

Suet is a high fat, high protein snack for birds that can help them survive in the winter, when natural food sources are scarcer. While not all birds will hang from the suet feeder, even the ground feeders will scoop up the remains that fall after a woodpecker or flock of starlings has descended upon the suet.

When choosing suet, look for those with low to no bird seed in them. Bird seed in suet is a filler, and not what the birds are looking for. Ideally, your suet uses real beef kidney suet and is full of peanuts, peanut butter, and insects for the highest protein value. Choosing suet with at least **6%** protein is preferable.

Check out our [Seed List](#) for a more comprehensive look at the feeders and seeds that birds enjoy.



Bushtits enjoying suet

Not all bird seeds work well in every style of feeder, and not every bird will use them either. Choosing the seed and feeder that best matches the birds you want to attract is an important part of bird feeding.

To attract the widest variety of birds, we would recommend fly-through style feeders. These feeders are open trays that may or may not have a roof, are accessible to all birds, and fit a day or two of seed. The open design makes it easy to see your feathered guests and they work with all kinds of bird seed. Though you can use any kind of seed in a fly-through feeder, we would recommend choosing hulled sunflower or our Gourmet blend to appeal to the most bird species.

Hopper style feeders are also a great option. Similar to the fly-through, they have a plexi-glass reservoir that you can fill with a few days of seed that is then dispensed out the bottom into the tray. Hopper feeders work great with our Gourmet and Royal blends, along with hulled or in the shell sunflower, and white millet.

Ground feeders are open trays that sit on or low to the ground, for birds such as towhees, sparrows, juncos, quail, and other ground-feeders. They are most often used with white millet, as rodents aren't a fan and tend to leave it alone even when it's accessible.

Tube style feeders are used by birds like chickadees, nuthatches, finches, and occasionally woodpeckers if they can perch properly. Ground feeders like juncos and sparrows don't like these as much, as the stick-like perches make these birds have to sit awkwardly in order to get any seed, though some sparrows are evolving and starting to use these feeders. Tube feeders work best with black oil or hulled sunflower, peanuts, and nyjer seed. Nyjer seed is generally used in specific tube feeders, used by the American Goldfinch and Pine Siskins, with a much smaller hole.

Suet feeders are also popular during the winter months but can be used year-round to attract woodpeckers, chickadees, nuthatches, and bushtits, among others.

Using different styles of feeders with different seeds in each feeder can help you attract a wide variety of birds to your backyard that you may not see if you stick to just one type.



STARLINGS: WHAT ARE THEY AND WHERE DID THEY COME FROM?

While they may not be anyone's favorite bird, European Starlings are an interesting bird to watch. Introduced species such as these starlings tend towards aggressive behavior and usually win fights with native birds. They also learn to rapidly adapt to changes and thrive in urban settlements.

Unlike the introduction of the House Sparrow for insect control in agriculture, the Starling was introduced as part of a plan to bring all the birds mentioned in Shakespeare's works over to North America. It is thought that the first attempts to bring starlings over was as early as 1850, though they weren't successful until 1890. Sixty birds were released in Central Park, New York in 1890 and they have since gotten established and moved steadily across North America.

Most of us consider Starlings to be a menace bird, who comes and eats all our cherries and grapes *right* before we go to pick them. They inhale suet at such a high rate that sometimes it feels like the pocketbook empties as fast as the suet feeder. If you are noticing Starlings devouring all your suet, switching to an upside down suet feeder can help. Starlings find upside down suet feeders difficult to use, though other suet eating birds don't mind.

Introduced bird species such as House Sparrows and European Starlings can create problems for our native bird species. They have a hardy appetite, depleting natural food sources. It's common for introduced species to take over the nesting sites of native birds, killing young and adult alike to control the nesting cavity.

Although starlings can be a pest they are interesting to watch and see how their habits defer from our native species and how they learn to adapt and survive.



UPSIDE DOWN SUET FEEDERS



Starlings aren't fond of hanging upside down to feed. If it doesn't stop them it will slow them down significantly. Other birds like woodpeckers, chickadees, and nuthatches naturally feed upside down.

Single \$36.99 Double \$42.99

Why did Mozart sell his chickens?

Because they kept saying "bach, bach!"



ARE YOU READY FOR HUMMINGBIRDS?



Are you ready for the arrival of the Rufous Hummingbirds? In the Nanaimo area, they show up around the middle of March, though we recommend that you have your feeder up the first week of March in case a few show up early. Keep an eye out for when the Red Flowering Currant blooms, as that's a good indication of when the hummingbirds should

start to appear. They can be found feeding at the Currants within a couple days of blooming.

The Rufous are the busiest when they first arrive in March and into April. This activity subsides as we move into April and the males establish nesting territories and the females begin to nest. Activity increases again in June and July as the young hummingbirds fledge and the Rufous begin their trek back south.

Keeping your hummingbird feeders clean is important all year. We recommend using a bleach-water solution of 1 part bleach to 9 parts water, and avoiding any soaps that may leave a residue in the feeder. Keeping your hummingbird feeder clean is an important part of feeding the hummingbirds. When choosing a feeder, look for one that is easy to take fully apart and clean.

If you are placing out a new feeder this year, make sure to put it somewhere that gives you a good view. Like other birds, hummingbirds find everything by sight and sound. With their ultra-violet vision red stands out as a food source colour, which is why so many feeders are red. Other bright colours can work as well, though if you notice your hummingbirds not finding your feeder within a week, adding a red ribbon can help catch their eye. Once the hummingbirds find your feeder you can remove the ribbon.



Hummingbirds have a great memory and know where your feeder was the previous year. While you can move your feeders to new locations, keep in mind it may take them a little time to find it again. Sometimes it can be easier to slowly change the feeder location instead of moving it all at once. Same with changing the feeder design. Hummingbirds can get tunnel vision and they know that *this* shape in *that* spot means food...but what's this new thing? Give them a week or two to realize the new feeder has nectar in it as well and they should be fine.

Now that they've found your feeder, it's time to make sure you are giving them healthy nectar. We recommend a 1 part sugar to 3 or 4 parts water. Use only white table sugar and don't add food colouring as these can be harmful to your birds.

Boil your water before adding the sugar. This will dissolve the sugar, kill any existing mold spores, and remove enzymes the hummingbirds don't like. You can make larger quantities of nectar and store the unused portion in the fridge for up to three weeks before you have to make a new batch.

While it can help it freeze slower in winter, we do not recommend making your nectar any sweeter than 1 to 3, as the higher sugar ratio can be harmful to your birds.

Since the sugar-water mixture does ferment, you will have to replace it every 5 days during winter, and 2-3 times a week during summers (or when temperatures reach 20°C or above). Frequent cleaning helps keep mold from growing that can affect the health of the birds. If using a **heater** with your hummingbird feeder, the nectar must be changed more frequently and treated like summer due to the heat.

If you have busy feeders, you can estimate how many hummingbirds visit by how many cups of sugar water you go through in a day. Every cup is roughly 65 hummingbirds!

Tip:

If ants and wasps are an issue at your feeders, the best way to eliminate the problem is to get a hummingbird feeder that doesn't leak. The nectar leaking from your feeder is what attracts them. Stop the leak, stop the insects.

HUMMZINGER SAUCER STYLE FEEDERS

Size range from 4oz. To 16oz.
available



BIRD WALKS

Bird walks are on Sundays (Nanaimo) and Tuesdays (Parksville). Locations and cancellations are posted to [our blog](#). **All bird walks are weather permitting and cancellations posted to our blog morning of.**

The Sunday Bird Walk leaves The Backyard at 9 a.m. on Sunday mornings.

The Parksville/Qualicum Beach Tuesday Bird Walk meet up location is the Parksville Tourist Information Center parking lot by Highway 19, Northwest Bay Rd. and Franklin's Gull Rd. in Parksville, also at 9 a.m.

The Tuesday Bird Walk is not held during the summer months (July & August) but it resumes the first Tuesday in September. There is no charge for our bird walks, and they are designed to conclude before lunch (average approximately 2 hours).

We decide on the location of each bird walk the week before the scheduled bird walk outing. During the week we compile information about what birds are being seen and examine the weather forecast to ensure the walk is scheduled for the most productive location.

All experience levels welcome. Bring your own binoculars when possible for the best experience.

HOURS OF OPERATION

Monday-Saturday 9:30-5:30

Sunday 12:00-4:30

Closed Most Stat Holidays

BIRD SIGHTINGS

Report bird sightings by emailing thebackyard@shaw.ca or calling 250-390-3669

JAN 17TH

Northern Shrike at Buttertubs Marsh
Northern Harrier, Northern Shrike, and 3 Meadowlarks at Nanaimo River Estuary

JAN 23RD

3 Snow Geese, 1 Greater White-fronted Goose, and 1 Cackling Goose at Buttertubs Marth

Check out [our online map](#) for common bird walk locations around Nanaimo and Parksville.

UPCOMING HOLIDAY HOURS

**Family Day, Monday
February 20th: CLOSED**

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

THE GREAT BACKYARD BIRD COUNT

February 17-20th. Visit birdcount.org to participate

NESTING

Nest boxes should be cleaned and up. Watch for birds checking your boxes out as we head into March.

MASON BEES

Get your bees and box out by the end of February. Cardboard tubes should be replaced and reusable blocks clean and disinfected.

HUMMINGBIRDS

Get hummingbird feeders out by the first week of March in case the Rufous show up early. Watch for the Anna's courtship displays as they start nesting in mid February.

CONTACT US

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