

THE BACKYARD NEWSLETTER

MAY 2023

HOUSE SPARROWS

House Sparrows were successfully introduced to North America in 1853 in order to control the moth cankerworm that was decimating crops. By the late 1800s, the population was booming and people were starting to realize the negative effects the House Sparrows had on native bird populations. The introduced sparrow would take over the nesting sites, leaving native birds to nest in areas more prone to predation.

In order to control the House Sparrow population a number of methods were introduced, including bounties on certain numbers brought in. However the greatest decline in the House Sparrow population was due to the introduction of automobiles. The sparrows were surviving off the wheat fed to horses, and with the decline of the horse and buggy their main food source was becoming scarcer.

Nowadays, while we don't have the huge populations from back then, they are beginning to make a comeback. With the spread of urbanization, this adaptive bird is expanding their population and range. In the early 2000s, they were found in parts of Harewood, the water front, and around Terminal Park, but now they have spread all across Nanaimo, Lantzville, and up to Parksville.

House Sparrow males have a gray crown on a dark brown body, with a black bib on their greyish chest. They have black bills and a small white wing bar, with a gray patch on their cheek. Female House Sparrows are light brown with no chest markings. They have a streaked back and a buffy eye stripe. Unlike native sparrows, the House Sparrow has no song, but they do chirp constantly.

When it comes to nesting, House Sparrows aren't picky. They can have four broods a year, with four or five young in each. In comparison, swallows will have one or two broods of three or four young in the same period.



Given the chance, House Sparrows will gladly take over your backyard and become the only bird you see. While we won't manage to eliminate them, we can help control their population growth.

For keeping House Sparrows out of your nest boxes and your feeders here are four things you can try.

1. Plugging the hole until your swallows come around can help keep them out.
2. Instead of using a round 1 3/8" hole, use an oval hole. Swallows are able to rotate their shoulders and fit through the long narrow gap but it is too small for House Sparrows. Nest boxes for smaller birds like chickadees should have entrance holes around 1 1/8" in diameter to keep House Sparrows out.
3. Removing the perch if it has one, and extending the overhang of the roof can help stop House Sparrows from bothering nesting birds.
4. Use black oil sunflower instead of white millet, as they are less likely to go for the sunflower.

DOWNY VS HAIRY WOODPECKER

MALE DOWNY (LEFT) AND MALE HAIRY (RIGHT)



MALE DOWNY

Dainty bill about 1/3 the length of the head (1" long)
approx. 6" tall—Towhee sized
spotted white outer tail feathers
back of the head has single patch of red

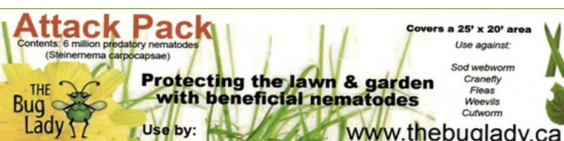
MALE HAIRY

'railroad spike' bill almost as long as the head
similar to a woodpecker's
approx. 9" tall—Robin sized
all white outer tail feathers
red patch on head often split into two patches

The Downy woodpecker is generally more abundant than the Hairy. Hairy woodpeckers prefer tall trees and deep woods while the Downy makes do with young birches and cattails.



USING NEMATODES



Attack Pack: \$39.99
Apply late April to late summer

Nemalawn: \$39.99
Apply May-October



Beneficial Nematodes are a live, parasitic worm that doesn't infect humans, pets, or plants. They are a great option for dealing with pests in your lawn without resorting to poisons that may negatively effect other organisms. There are different species of nematodes tailored to deal with different pests, though they are only effective on the grub or larval stage. Once the pest passes this stage, it is too big for the nematodes.

Beneficial nematodes come in a plastic bag and must be activated before use. To activate your nematodes mix the contents of the plastic bag with 600ml of room temperature water. This is the **nematode solution**. Nematode solution should then be mixed before using the included syringe to pull one full syringe of nematode solution and add to a 2.5 gallon watering can. The rest of the watering can should be filled with clean water and stirred. Apply activated nematodes to moist soil out of direct sunlight. Once applied, keep the area moist for two to three weeks to allow the nematodes time to work. Once you've started, nematodes must be used within four hours for optimal effectiveness.

The nematodes we carry this time of year are called the **Attack Pack** and **Nemalawn**.

Attack Pack nematodes are for dealing with cutworm, crane fly, weevils, sod web worm, fleas, viburnum beetle, asparagus beetle, and rootworm.

Nemalawn nematodes should be used for crane fly, sodworm, fleas, and fungus gnats.

Nematodes should only be used when the soil temperature is above 12°C unless specified otherwise.



BIRDS AND THEIR FEATHERS



PREENING AND BATHING

Keeping their feathers in top condition for flight and regulating their temperature requires constant cleaning and preening. Bathing can help remove dirt and particles trapped between the feathers that can impact their flight efficiency and ability to properly regulate their temperature. To this end birds are always on the lookout for a fresh supply of water. Providing a shallow dish of fresh water in your backyard can attract and help the birds.

If you spot a bird that appears to be covering themselves with dust, they are also working to maintain their feathers. Dust can help maintain the oil on the feathers and remove any excess that can mat the feathers. Dust may also help prevent certain parasites. Some birds may take dust baths, such as the California Quail.

Birds will also introduce ants into their feathers as a way to clean them. The ants will feed on the parasites and then the bird bathes to remove the ants. It could also be possible that the ants produce an acid that is then left on the bird's skin to help with molting.

Once the birds have bathed and are clean, they look for a safe perch to preen their feathers on. Preening allows the bird to maintain the shape of their feathers and also apply a conditioning oil that is produced by a gland at the base of the tail feathers. Birds will rub their bill over the gland and then over their feathers. As they cannot run their bill over their facial feathers, you may spot them rubbing their head against their chest or wings to oil their facial feathers.

Despite making up only 9% of a birds weight, feathers are an essential part of a birds' anatomy and perform many important functions. Birds feathers are amazingly complex and all have a specific purpose to fulfil. Birds rely on their feathers for flight, temperature control, and mating. Feathers are a delicate, uniquely constructed part of birds.

The main structure that all the other parts of the feather attaches to is called the shaft. The lower part of the shaft is referred to as the quill, which is held in a pocket of skin called a follicle. The vanes, described as "feathery little branches", are barbs that attach to the shaft. Each barb has smaller barbs called barbules that also have *smaller* filaments known as barbicels. The multiple parts of each feather interlock to create the smooth, strong construction of the feather.

Birds have five types of feathers; contour, down, filoplume, bristle, and semiplume. **Contour** feathers are those that are seen on the outside of the bird and include the flight, wing, and tail feathers. **Down** and **semiplume** feathers are located near the skin and help keep the bird warm in a similar way to how we use down-filled winter coats.

Filoplume feathers are a sensory feather that connects to the birds nervous system. When filoplume feathers are disturbed the bird then knows they should be preening. **Bristle** feathers are located around the facial area of the bird and are very sensitive, acting not unlike a cat's whiskers. They also help protect the birds eyes and nostrils. For example, when a woodpecker is excavating in a tree their bristle feathers keeps debris from entering their nostrils.

Each feather is fitted into a socket of skin that is controlled by the birds' muscles, allowing the bird to fluff their feathers as well as move feathers to trap air and insulate themselves. Flight feathers are specially mounted directly to the bone, as they require more strength to endure winds and flight.

Like human hair, feathers are designed to grow in a line. The feathers are layered to allow each to fulfil it's duty properly.



BIRD FEEDING IN SMALL SPACES

Attracting birds to your backyard is easy, but what do you do if you don't have a yard? While we may think that birds require a vast area surrounded by forest to hang out in, that isn't a requirement. Larger habitats may attract more birds or a larger variety of them but that doesn't mean you won't get any if you lack a large yard or live in a busy city.

Backyard bird watching is a fun hobby that can be enjoyed by everyone with any space, whether it's a large lot or a balcony on the fourth floor of an apartment building.

Adding a habitat for the birds can be as simple as putting a shrub or two in a planter. They don't have to be large, just having enough space for a few birds to perch and shelter in. The perching spot allows birds to come check out any feeders or other things you may put out for them without feeling at risk in the open. You can even add a branch to your deck railing for them to perch if you lack space for larger things.

Smaller spaces can make large feeders impractical so using a tray style feeder, a window feeder, or even a shallow dish set out on a patio table can work fine. Song birds have excellent hearing and eyesight and they use these senses to find food.

Make sure if you are putting out any bird food to make it nice and visible by putting it at or near the height of an existing railing and near the edge of any overhang. Then be patient. Once the first bird discovers the dish, the rest will follow. Once they've found the feeder you can move it to a better location nearby if you like.

If you add a feeder it's best to avoid wild bird seed mixes as they tend to have a lot of filler seeds that birds don't eat, creating a huge mess as the birds toss the unwanted seeds away. When feeding birds in small spaces or anywhere you don't want mess or seeds to grow, we recommend using hulled sunflower seed. Hulled sunflower is sunflower seed without the shell and it attracts all seed-eating birds.

When filling your feeder it's best to put out smaller amounts, roughly how much your birds can go through in a single day. Making sure the bird seed is getting eaten and not sitting out helps keep the area around your feeders clean, which is important to ensure your birds remain healthy.

Add water to your small feeding station, or put water out instead of bird food. Not all birds will come to feeders but they all need a drink and a bath at some point! Shallow dishes, 2" deep at the most, are better as birds are likely to avoid anything too deep, and the water dish should be placed somewhere visible.

Birds that may find your smaller area attractive include chickadees, finches, sparrows, and Northern Flickers.

Another bird species that can be attracted to smaller spaces or greater heights is the hummingbird. Hummingbird feeders are generally small and easy to maintain, using a nectar mixture of three or four parts water to one part sugar. Make sure to use white table sugar and avoid food colouring or anything that changes the colour of the nectar mix. Just make sure to change the nectar and clean your feeders once a week during temperatures under 20°C, and two to three times when it's over 20°C.

"THE NEWCASTLE" CEDAR WINDOW FEEDER



Locally made with Western Red Cedar, this window feeder uses four suction cups to attach to your window.

Attracts all birds and gives you a great view.

*Weight rated for up to 4 full sized Quail.

Why did the bird go to the library?

He was looking for bookworms!



IDENTIFYING BIRDS

It's the fun time of year when we get to see the first broods of young out and about. Different bird species are beginning to make their way through backyards, making it a great time to work on IDing birds. If you are unsure of a bird's ID and are caught between something local and something rare or uncommon, chances are it's going to be the local bird. For example, Anna's Hummingbirds can sometimes be mistakenly IDed as Black-chinned Hummingbirds when the lighting makes the red seem dark or black.

When a new bird visits your yard your first instinct may be to go grab your field guide, only for you to return to find the bird has moved on. What you should try first is simply watching the bird, noting down any clues to help you identify the species. If you have a notepad or cellphone, write down any distinguishing features, field markings, colouring, and note what the bird is doing. If you can take photos, they can be a big help for IDing your bird. Features that help identify birds are **colour**, **size**, **field markings**, **habitat**, and the **habits** of the bird.

Size is a general idea of the birds size. Is it sparrow, robin, crow, or eagle sized? This is a quick way to eliminate species. You don't have to be 100% accurate and know that the bird is 6" tall, but having a basic idea is a good start.

Colour can be a little bit trickier as sometimes the same bird species can have some colour variation. For example, a male House Finch can vary from brilliant red to a more dull orange colour. Noting not only what colours but also where they are is important for getting a correct ID. Do they have coloured markings on their back, chest, head, tail or wing?

When checking for field markings, look for wing bars, eye stripes and rings, beak, tail, and anything else that stands out. Wing bars can be two or three bars crossing the wings and are usually white, like those of the American Goldfinch. Eye stripes are stripes located above or through the eye. Song Sparrows have an easily spotted large gray eye stripe that can help differentiate between the Song and Fox Sparrows. Eye rings are a small ring that goes fully or halfway around the birds eye. Keep an eye out for the American Robin and see if you can spot their eye ring.

Looking at a bird's beak can tell you a lot. The colour and type of beak can narrow down your potential bird species significantly if you know what to look for.

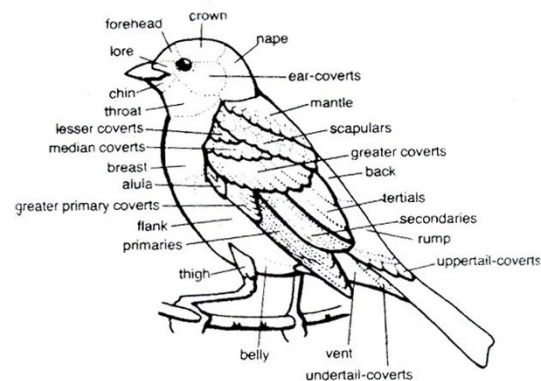
Finches have a large conical bill that is designed to crack open seeds and cones. A Woodpeckers long, slender bill is great for excavating bugs from within trees. Smaller slender bills like those of the nuthatch may have difficulty cracking seeds but are excellent at finding larvae and eggs on shrubs and trees.

Watching where the bird is can be a useful clue for identifying. A bird seen swimming in a marsh or in the ocean is not going to be a nuthatch. For example, if you are trying to decide if a bird sitting on a fence is a sparrow or a finch you would watch where it goes when it leaves. If the bird goes up into the trees, it's a finch but if it goes down to shrubs or the ground, it's a sparrow.

A bird's habits are a useful tell of what the bird is. If your bird never seems to fly but is always running on the ground it's likely to be a California Quail. Does your bird visit feeders and flit off with one seed at a time? That's common behavior for Chestnut-backed Chickadees and Red-breasted Nuthatches. Spotted Sandpipers tend to bob their tails, and the sparrow-sized Brown Creeper runs up trees in a similar manner to woodpeckers.

Also remember to note anything that draws your attention. What made you notice this bird at first? Did their long (or short) tail draw your eye? Was it a brilliant colour that you weren't expecting to see or does the bird have an unusual marking you noticed? Whatever the reason, make sure to note it down.

It may seem challenging to identify birds but it isn't as difficult as you may think. The feeling of correctly identifying a bird and learning more about them is something special. The excitement of new birds visiting and the satisfaction of figuring out what they are, or even what they might be, is part of what makes bird watching so much fun.



WAVES IN MOTION

\$239.99

WIND SPINNERS

COME IN BURGUNDY AND
YELLOW



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 by the morning of around 8:00 a.m.**

The Sunday Bird Walk leaves The Backyard at 9 a.m. on Sunday mornings, or on location at 9:15 a.m.

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., or on location at 9:15 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

DELIVERY SCHEDULE FOR MAY

North Nanaimo to the Comox Valley

May 10th and May 24th

South Nanaimo to Duncan

May 3rd and May 17th

CONTACT US

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BIRD SIGHTINGS

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

APRIL 7TH

Townsend's Solitaire at Timberwood Drive.

APRIL 14TH

Chipping Sparrow at Drew Road, Qualicum.

APRIL 15TH

Yellow-rumped Warbler at Oliver Woods.

APRIL 18TH

Mountain Bluebird at Englishman River Estuary.

APRIL 25TH

Hermit Thrush at Piper's Pub.

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

UPCOMING HOLIDAY HOURS

Victoria Day, May 22nd: CLOSED
Canada Day, July 2nd: CLOSED

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

BLACK-HEADED GROSBEAKS AND WESTERN TANAGERS

Keep an eye out for these backyard visitors in the coming weeks!

HUMMINGBIRD NECTAR

As the weather warms up, remember to change your hummingbird nectar more frequently to avoid fermentation.

MIGRATORY BIRD DAY

May 13th is Migratory Bird Day. While last year focused on dimming your lights to help birds that migrate at night, this year Environment for the Americas has decided to highlight **water** and it's importance for wild birds.

