THE BACKYARD
WILDBIRD & NATURE STORE
ENJOYING NATURE IN YOUR OWN BACKYARD™

Birding in the Backyard

SEPTEMBER 2026

K. MacDonald

Pine Siskins

BY KELSEY

Pine Siskins are a nomadic, irruptive species that goes basically wherever the food is good. This usually means they move en masse roughly every two years, following natural seed. This year is already shaping up to be a high year for siskins, with reports of flocks already in the area.

Siskins are small, streaky finches with small, sharply pointed bills and short, notched tails. Their wings are streaky with some yellow markings that may appear more prevalent when they flare their wings or fly.

They do everything in a colony, from feeding to travelling and breeding. They stick together year round, and can often be seen around American Goldfinch. Pine Siskins are also quite loud and will constantly call to each other, whether they're perched or flying.

Pine Siskins, like the American Goldfinch, have a small, fine bill that isn't great at breaking seeds. They will go for medium chip or black oil sunflower seed when it's available, but prefer the easier to break, smaller pieces of fine chip, thistle, and nyjer seeds.

They've also been known to hang around other feeders when a bird with a larger, stronger bill is eating so they can snatch up any fallen bits of seed.

Pine Siskins often stay in loose colonies even during nesting, with their flock mates nesting just a few trees away.

The female builds the nest, loosely attaching it near the end of a horizontal branch that's well-concealed by foliage. Due to the loose attachment, strong winds or gusts can knock it free if they're unlucky.

She takes 5 or 6 days to complete the shallow saucer using twigs, grasses, leaves, bark strips, and lichen. Though he doesn't contribute to the building, the male may bring his partner nesting material during the process.

The inner cup, which can be up to 2 inches deep, is lined with soft materials such as fur, feathers, thistle down, and moss. The pair lays 3 to 5 eggs, then spends roughly 2 weeks incubating, and another 2 weeks caring for the young before they fledge the nest and join the flock.

American Goldfinch Breeding vs Winter Plumage

Breeding Plumage (left) and Winter Plumage (right)

American Goldfinch
(Breeding Male)
—J. Morrison

The Male American Goldfinch's breeding plumage is their signature brilliant gold with black wings, marked with 2 white wingbars. They have a black marking on their forehead above their bill and between their eyes, and a notched black tail with white markings. The rest of their body is the bright, sunny yellow they're known for.

The male Goldfinch's non-breeding winter plumage is a much duller unstreaked brown, with pale wingbars replacing the white on their black wings. The black forehead marking also vanishes in favour of a dull brown.

We do have pockets of goldfinch that stay all year round, though people can think they've migrated once the bright yellow disappears from backyard feeders.
There are populations in Parksville, as well as good sized one around Buttertubs Marsh that stays the winter.

Americam Goldfinch
(Winter Male)
—R. Harbo

Buffet Style Preferred

by Kelsey

Have you ever noticed that you seem to get the same few birds, no matter what you put out in your feeder? While part of it could be that's just the most common—or most pushy—visitors in your area, another part can be impacted by the type of feeder you're using.

There's a lot of different types, and birds can have an easier time using one over the other, which may impact whether or not they visit yours at all. The type of food they go after in the wild is a good indicator of what types of feeders they can be attracted to.

Ground feeding birds like the sparrows, towhees, and juncos have bodies designed to lean forwards to eat. This means that they're a lot more likely to use feeders with an open tray, and a lot less likely to try and cling onto a tube style feeder. Certain tube feeders, like the Squirrel Busters, come with a U-shaped perch instead of the simple stick style, which is far more attractive to ground birds and makes it much easier for them to give the feeder a try.

Other birds, like chickadees, nuthatches, and finches are clinging birds, and while they're completely fine using a tray style feeder they're also well suited to tube feeders and feeders that rely on the birds clinging instead of perching. Nyjer socks for Goldfinch are a good example of a feeder designed for clinging.

While finches aren't as interested, chickadees, nuthatches, Bushtits, woodpeckers, and even the occasional junco are attracted to a hanging suet feeder. A simple, basic cage will do the job just fine, but as woodpeckers (and some smaller birds) like to brace their tail when they are pecking chunks of suet free, adding a tail prop or similar can encourage them to come around more often and stay longer.

Some birds aren't attracted to feeders at all, but may visit a water feature or bird bath if it's available. Having a variety of options increases your chances of getting more, different birds to visit your yard, though luck helps!

Insulated Hummingbird Feeder

Designed for both hot and cold weather, the Anna's Healthy Hummingbird feeder includes a vacuum insulated chamber underneath an 8oz. nectar reservoir.

Fill the chamber with hot water during the winter to help slow down freezing, or cold water or ice during the summer to help slow down fermentation

Best of all? They require no electricity!

$59.99 ea.

Nature's Housekeepers

BY IVY-LYNNE

Turkey Vultures are often labeled as an unfortunately necessary scourge amongst the avian world. Their unsavory eating habits along with their somewhat unnerving appearance have made it so many people don't learn much about them past their most negatively viewed attributes.

In reality, Turkey Vultures are actually one of the most fascinating birds I've read about in a while.

To begin with; the name. Despite what one might think, Turkey Vultures have no direct genetic relation to turkeys. In fact, studies conducted on Turkey Vulture DNA have concluded that they're more likely to be related to storks that diverged at some point in history and began to participate in a scavenger's lifestyle.

The name actually comes from their appearance, including their distinctive red, bald head, and size, which somewhat resemble turkeys.

Turkey Vultures are a highly adaptable species. They can be found anywhere from southern Canada all the way down to South America. They generally prefer to reside in open areas, along with forest shrublands, pastures, deserts, and even urban centers.

They often gather in these spaces in a communal roost, where their flocks, called kettles when flying, can range from a few birds to thousands. You may have spotted them yourself, looming in tall trees or circling above in search of carrion.

Carrion, or the decaying flesh of animals, is the primary food source of the Turkey Vulture. Their diet leaves them to play a vital part in preventing the spread of disease and decay in ecosystems. The stomach acid of the vulture is strong enough to allow the bird to digest toxins such as anthrax and botulism, which would be extremely harmful for other birds or creatures to ingest.

Even their bald heads, lacking any feathers at all, assist in their 'housekeeping' activities by keeping bacteria and parasites from being able to cling to them and spread.

Another benefit to their diet? Turkey Vultures help keep other carrion-eating animals, like stray and feral dogs, from spreading diseases they aren't equipped to handle.

In order to find food, Turkey Vultures rely heavily on their sense of smell. They can detect carrion from high above, even through dense vegetation. Once discovered, the Turkey Vulture descends either alone or in a feeding group called a *wake*. Typically, wakes are more likely in the morning and early afternoon, and are avoided during overly warm weather.

Heat drives the Turkey Vultures away, as it increases the decomposition rate and makes carrion less attractive. Though they feed primarily on decaying flesh, they still prefer it to be on the fresher side, usually a day or two old.

Despite their tough appearance and tendency to snack on roadkill, vultures are not a very combative bird. When confronted, they're more likely to take off than to stick around and fight. If they do go on the defensive, however, they have an interesting tactic.

When confronted with danger, vultures can projectile vomit up to 10 feet away as a defensive measure. The reason for this? It's a great distraction for predators or other threats, and it also makes the bird a little lighter for a faster getaway.

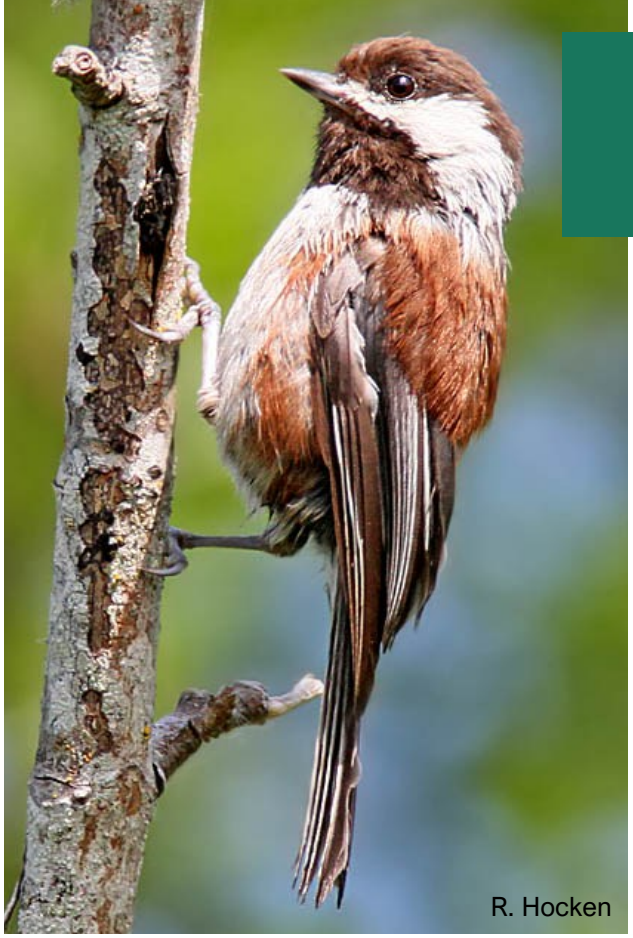
This isn't the only out of the box method vultures employ their bodily fluids in either; on overly hot days, they have been known to defecate on their own legs as a cooling measure.

While it's hard to argue with the opinion that vultures are a very, *very* strange bird, it's equally difficult to downplay their importance and interesting behaviours.

Without their desire to snack on roadside accidents and hunting mishaps, diseases from decaying animals would be a much larger threat to us and any other wildlife that comes in contact with it. The next time you see one flying around, make sure to show a little appreciation for their hard work.

Did you know?

Turkey Vultures migrate south for the winter, launching off Vancouver Island in mid September to late October from East Sooke Park in Victoria?



R. Hocken

Regular Birds? Or Tiny Feathered Guerilla Gardeners?

BY KELSEY

As we head into September, you may notice some backyard birds starting to quickly grab seeds and fly off with them, further than they would if they were going to eat them right away.

An evolutionary tactic known as *caching* is responsible. Caching is a survival method that birds, and other critters, use in case of low food availability. It's especially common to see during the winter months, when potential food sources may be buried under snow or ice, if around at all.

Caching is a giant concentration game for wild birds. Not only do they have to fly back and forth to tuck their seeds away, they also have to pay attention that they aren't followed, their seeds aren't stolen, and *then* they have to remember where they left them!

While birds are usually able to remember exactly where they cached their seeds, that doesn't always mean they go back to eat them. And those cached seeds that aren't eaten? They can sprout!

If you've ever had a sunflower start growing in a weird location in your yard, it may just be an unused cache from one of your local birds.

There are two general kinds of caching; *scatter-hoarding* and *larder-hoarding*. Scatter-hoarding birds will create many small caches across a wide area, while larder-hoarding birds put larger stockpiles in fewer locations.

Scatter-hoarding is actually a prolific method of long distance seed dispersal for plants. Because scatter-hoarders usually bury their seed to hide it better, the chances of germination increases. If they don't come back and eat it, which is common, the plant gets a chance to grow.

Birds that are caching seeds may tuck them away in a wide variety of locations, far from where they picked it up. While sometimes the result is the seed doesn't make it due to the massive difference in environment, scatter-caching is still an important part of population spread, colonization, and population connectivity for many plants.

Birds in general, not just caching birds, are one of the most effective plant dispersal vehicles due to their high mobility. While not solely dependent on birds, over 70% of woody plant species around the world rely on animals to spread them.

By moving seeds to new, different areas, birds can actually help maintain the genetic diversity in plant populations while also enabling plant species distribution shifts.

Other ways birds help disperse seeds include knocking seeds free during feeding, losing seeds during transit to a cache, having seeds get stuck on their body and fall or be rubbed off, and undigested seeds in their droppings.

References

How Birds Shape the Landscape

What is Caching and Why Do Birds Do It?

Scatter-hoarding Birds Disperse Seeds to Sites Unfavorable for Plant Regeneration

Individual Behaviour Shapes Patterns of Bird-Mediated Seed Dispersal

Where is That Bird Going With That Seed? It's Caching Food for Later

The Newt Kids on the Block

BY DAVE

When you're out and about rolling logs and dip-netting ponds on Denman Island, as one does, you may come across a new resident there that's been recently introduced to Canada. *Mesotriton alpestris*, or Alpine Newts, have arrived!

Originating from and found in most of Europe, these newts have been introduced to non-native regions in mainland Europe, the UK, Ireland, New Zealand, and now Canada.

These small salamanders are 10 to 12 cm in size. The males are blue-black with spotted lower sides, and during breeding they gain a yellow (or cream) and black banded low crest that runs the length of their bodies.

The females are a less colourful marbled grey-green. At a quick glance, the female Alpine Newt may be mistaken for our native Rough Skinned. Both sexes have orange undersides, and some have heavily spotted chins and throats.

In late winter through to spring, adult Alpine Newts move from under their logs and rocks in the forest to more aquatic habitats, for breeding. Each female can lay up to 200 single eggs, attached to a leaf which is then carefully folded for protection.

Once hatched the newt larvae are generally salamander shaped, with feathery gills on either side of their head. The newts are fully aquatic for the first 4 to 6 months before metamorphosing into tiny, 3 to 5 cm efts. These efts then move into the forest, where they'll stay for three years before returning to the water to breed.

The first Alpine Newt recorded in Canada was a male, found on Denman Island in 2018. Another male was later recorded in 2022, and in 2026 several were found in a private pond on Denman.

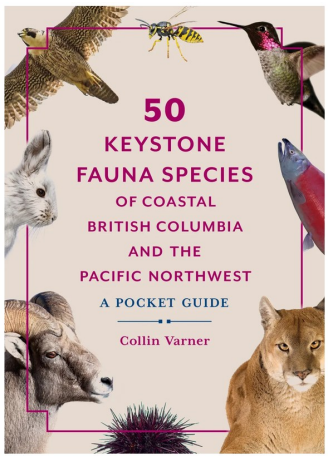
All were uploaded and logged into iNaturalist. According to the owner of the private pond, she first noticed the newts a few years ago. At the time of reporting in 2026, the pond was "loaded" with them, and our native newts didn't appear to be present at all.

I have since been over to the private pond location with permission from the land owner, where I collected five adult Alpine Newts; two males and three females. We were also able to scoop up two adult native newts, and several native salamander larvae.

The newts' origin on Denman is believed to be from some exotics' keeper, who likely released some into their pond and assumed they'd stay within it's bounds. As it turns out, Alpine Newts have been known to travel 1.8km between water sources. This is likely how they've been introduced outside their native range in other areas as well.

Aside from the potential competition for resources posed by their introduction, another danger to our native amphibians comes in the form of a fungal infection called *Batrachochytrium salamandrivorans*, or Bsal for short, which can lead to death.

I am currently collecting specimens for the Royal British Columbia Museum, so if you're over on Denman and come across any please take note of the approximate location, take photos for ID confirmation, and let me know here at the shop! If you use iNaturalist, you can record it through there too.



50 Keystone Fauna Species

This pocket-sized field guide by bestselling naturalist Collin Varner highlights 50 keystone birds, mammals, amphibians, insects, fish, shellfish, and mollusks found across the Pacific Northwest bioregion.

Each entry features clear photography, etymology, descriptions, habitat information, risks and warnings. This convenient and easy reference is perfect for casual walkers, hikers, campers, beachcombers, sailors, paddlers, and whale watchers, and draws awareness to the importance of conservation and protection of these crucial species.

$19.95 ea.

Bird Walks

Bird walks are on Sundays (Nanaimo) and Tuesdays (Parksville). Locations and cancellations are posted to thebirdstore.blogspot.com.

Bird Walks will be resuming on Tuesday, September 8th and Sunday, September 13th with locations to be announced.

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.

Bird walks are not held during the summer months (July & August) but resume in early September. They also go on pause during the winter (December & January), resuming in early February.

There's no charge for our bird walks, and they are designed to conclude before lunch, averaging roughly 2 hours. All experience levels welcome.

Bring your own binoculars when possible, and decent walking shoes for the best experience.

Check out our online map for common bird walk locations around Nanaimo and Parksville.

Hours of Operation

Monday-Saturday 9:30-5:30
Sunday 12:00-4:30

Upcoming Holiday Hours

September 7th, *Labour Day*: Closed
September 30th, *Reconciliation Day*: Closed

What's Happening in September

Watch for Steller's Jays arriving in backyards.

Caching behaviours by birds like chickadees, nuthatches, and jays are starting; watch at feeders.

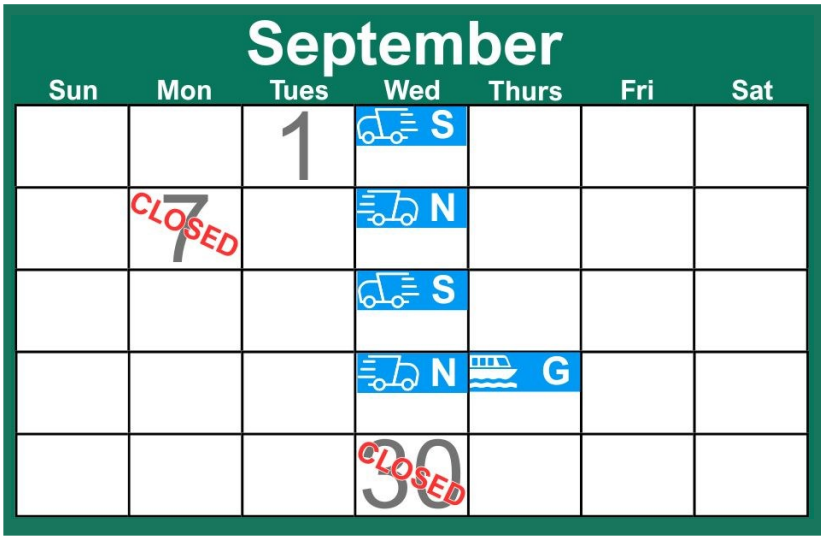
Birds are no longer in breeding pairs, but winter flocks.

Great time to store your mason bee cocoons to keep predators out, but don't clean them just yet!

Out with the bright spring breeding plumage and in with the duller, better disguised winter colourations for plenty of birds like the American Goldfinch.

Delivery Schedule for September

North Nanaimo to the Comox Valley
September 9th and **September 23rd**
South Nanaimo to Duncan
September 2nd and **September 16th**



Local Field Naturalist Groups

Nature Nanaimo | Arrowsmith Naturalists | Comox Valley Nature | Cowichan Valley Naturalist Society | Malaspina Naturalists | Rocky Point Bird Observatory | Saltspring Trail & Nature Club | Victoria Natural History Society | Yellowpoint Ecological Society

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