



American Tree Sparrows get into the mix.

THIS ISSUE

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Around the Area Schools in February
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Winter Bird Feeding: Ground, Zero

The intensity has waned over the past week, but for the better part of the prior month we humans - locally and beyond - have grudgingly endured quite an incessant one-two punch of snow and extreme cold. On the upside, the bird activity out our windows has never been better. The same conditions that contribute to our inconvenience, frustration and malaise also happen to create a perfect storm of bird feeder visitations, especially if you're located in more rural environs.

We've maintained feeding stations for wild birds continuously since we moved into these premises north of Williamston over thirty-seven years ago. Currently one station is just outside the south-facing dining room bay window and the other outside the large east-facing nature center window. Throughout this particular stretch - most intensely early and late in the day - a combined tally of the constantly moving feathered beings out both windows has routinely topped one hundred. Their ravenous urgency is palpable. Under conditions like these you could say they are, quite literally, living on the edge.

When the landscape is densely and continuously blanketed with snow, granivorous songbirds can access very little of the naturally-occurring seeds that have fallen from grasses, weeds, shrubs and trees through fall and early winter. To compound their plight, the colder it gets, the more fuel necessary to keep their core temperatures stable. If a bird fails to consume enough to maintain its inner furnace it quickly freezes to death, or perhaps more mercifully, becomes sluggish enough to become easy pickings for a roving Cooper's Hawk.



A first-year Cooper's Hawk takes a break on our tray feeder between songbird forays.

I doubt that many people who have feeders in their yards can rival the volume of birds that we've been

hosting the past few weeks, but then again there aren't many who take their wild bird feeding as seriously as we do! We make sure that our specially-fashioned restaurants have a supply of quality bird fuel continuously available for them.

For our effort they reward us with up-close looks. The perpetual motion of their spritely desperation is nothing short of absorbing, if not downright entertaining. Prolonged viewing also opens a *figurative* window into specific behaviors, rivalries, predatory ambushes and other avian dramas that are otherwise more difficult to notice in the wild. Indeed, done with diligence, I find the endeavor of wild bird feeding to truly rank among the best natural antidotes for the mid-winter doldrums.



A chickadee clings to our mesh sunflower feeder.

We currently maintain a suet cage along with three hanging feeders and one mounted bin feeder. All are filled with nothing but oil sunflower. This is the most sought-after seed by the majority of birds. However, like tables available at a restaurant, the limited landing spaces on the feeders dictate how many birds can dine at a given moment. When errant seeds spill from an occupied feeder, surrounding birds quickly find and devour them.

This leads to what I have found perhaps to be the most critical aspect to attracting a large volume of birds over winter: Provide seed for them *beyond* the confines of the bird feeders themselves. Like the hungry human patrons waiting for a table, excess cardinals, finches

and more flutter and perch around the periphery as they wait for an occupied feeder port to become available. By sprinkling a mix broadly across the ground nearby, in effect, the 'seating capacity' is increased many times over. When the weather is particularly wintry, I often scatter it in this fashion several times through the day. Do this whenever snow covers the ground, when it is extremely cold, or especially when snow *and* such cold combine; then watch how quickly your bird restaurant ascends to the squawk of the town.

There are a huge variety of packaged, wild bird seed mixes available these days. Some 'gourmet' blends cost more than I am willing to spend. However, I find most low-end mixes undesirable for other reasons... Be suspect of the cheapest ones. Check the ingredient seeds on the label - sunflower, millet, cracked corn, good; milo, rolled oats, flax or likely anything else, bad. These latter seeds are generally low in price, so some distributors use them as filler to make up the total weight of the sack that you buy. They are also so low in avian preference that all other seeds get selectively pecked out of the mix. Before long, a pile of undesirable seeds accumulates.

Tried-and-true over decades, I blend my own combination of just three seed types, purchased separately in bulk. The medley is relatively inexpensive. I buy a fifty pound bag each of white millet, cracked corn and oil sunflower then mix enough at a time to fill a five-gallon bucket kept next to the nature center's back



My home-blended mix: 40 percent millet, 40 percent cracked corn and 20 percent sunflower.

door: forty percent each of millet and corn, and only twenty percent sunflower. Why so chintzy on the most popular seed? Any bird visiting the station has ready access to as much sunflower as it would like in the elevated feeders.

This leads to my proclaimed ‘cardinal sin’ of bird feeding: do *not* fill a tube-style feeder with mixed birdseed. If you do, very often birds almost immediately stop visiting it, and the seed inside remains untouched into the future, eventually to rot.

Since most feeder-visitors are looking for sunflower above all else, a cardinal or chickadee or two will alight on the perches under the feeding ports and remove the few sunflower seeds that are visible in the opening. Once these are picked out, however, the other closely packed seeds in the tube keep any more of the sunflowers from funneling to the opening. While you may look out the window to perceive a full feeder that for some reason the birds are not visiting, as far as they are concerned it is as good as empty.

I also do not recommend putting mix into a bin-style feeder. Although the seeds of a given bird’s choice dispense from the open bottom slot of the bin more freely, visiting Blue Jays will make a mess of it. Like so many other feeding station visitors, the jays seek sunflower above everything else. When all the exposed sunflower seeds have been picked up, a jay learns very quickly to thrash its beak through the interfering seeds to get them out of the way. More mix works down to the opening, thus exposing additional sunflower. When these are then picked out it thrashes the remaining seed out of the way again, and so on. I’ve seen a bin feeder filled with two quarts of mix emptied within an hour by a small band of Blue Jays. Three quarters of it (minus the sunflower) piles up on the ground below.

The perpetually-rotating line of ‘regulars’ that visit the feeders for sunflower this winter include the Northern Cardinal, Blue Jay, House Finch, American Goldfinch, Black-capped Chickadee, Tufted Titmouse, White breasted Nuthatch, Red-breasted Nuthatch. Most of these – some more often than others – will slip in to take a few whacks at the caged suet between rotations of Downy, Hairy and Red-bellied Woodpeckers.



A male Hairy Woodpecker rarely visits the feeding station for anything other than suet.



A pair of cautious Mourning Doves alight on the power line behind the feeding station to survey the scene before descending to feed.

Mourning Doves are made for consuming mix on the ground. Seed-preference studies find sunflower to be their top choice too, but they are bulky and somewhat clumsy-looking as they attempt to balance on many elevated feeders. On terra firma the Mourning Dove may be the least discerning of the feeding station visitors. No more sunflower? No problem. It is content to round out its crop with millet and cracked corn. What else have you got? They’ll contentedly fill their crops with almost any other seeds on hand, too.

Any of the other feeder birds listed above are impelled to fly down and feed on the mix-covered snow below. When they do, though, they often find themselves immersed in the fitful midst of a picking, pecking throng of sparrow activity.

In general, sparrows prefer to feed on the ground wherever they roam across open rural landscapes. The same is true when they visit your ‘birdaurant.’ They are naturally disinclined to dine at elevated feeders and seem incapable of accessing seed from the mesh feeders on which so many other small birds cling with ease.



The House Sparrow could use a new moniker.

Within minutes of scattering seed on the ground, a torrent of sparrows descends from the trees. The millet in the mix is their primary attraction. Often shoulder to shoulder they hop, flutter, and bustle over the freshly dropped seeds like honey bees in a hive. In fact, in any random snapshot of feeding station action, the sparrows here comprise at least eighty percent of all avian patrons.

If you find yourself blanching at the mention of sparrows you might be envisioning the wrong ‘sparrow’ – and yes, I find that one distasteful too. The House Sparrow (a.k.a., English Weaver Finch) is the name given to the alien, invasive Old World species

that resides within the bird family, Passeridae. The species is a world apart from the varied and subtly beautiful array of accomplished songsters that make up the ‘true,’ native, migratory North American Sparrows (Family Emberizidae). Unfortunately for these true sparrows, when many folks hear the word ‘sparrow’ they envision this nuisance bird first. They should never be lumped together. Check out the opening columns in these past newsletters for more about our experience with House Sparrows:

<http://naturediscovery.net/pdf/WILD%20TIMES%20Mar14.pdf>

<http://naturediscovery.net/pdf/WILD%20TIMES%20Jan22.pdf>

In highly urbanized settings attempting to feed wild birds can be an exercise in frustration. House Sparrows are apt to overwhelm the feeders and can often severely limit the number of visitations by more desirable native species.



One of scads of American Tree Sparrows feeds on mix scattered atop the tortoise pen’s brick wall.



This Dark-eyed Junco’s pale bill is highlighted by the setting sun’s ray as it devours seeds inside the pen.

This winter, three *native* sparrow species - migrants from The North - have been enticed from the surrounding snow-blanketed fields, hedgerows and overgrown ditches to our artificial bounty. After weeks of observation, I’m confident that well over one hundred American Tree Sparrows land and feed under our feeders throughout a day. A few dozen Dark-eyed Juncos (a sparrow species without ‘sparrow’ in its

name) would be considered a high number by most standards but when each foraging Junco is flanked or surrounded by four or five Tree Sparrows they appear sparse among the mob. White-throated Sparrows generally migrate south of Michigan's border, but this winter at least five individuals have decided that staying close to our feeding stations is a sure bet to ward off starvation without having to fly so far.

In the winter it is the rare sparrow that chooses to dine alone. Indeed, all native sparrow species are gregarious to the nth degree over the winter! Where one goes, five, ten or more follow, and we enjoy the end result out the window every day.

Ecologists sometimes call winter 'the killing season' for good reason.

As winter wears on and snow and cold persist, deer become increasingly taxed in their search for food. Lately, they are indicating desperation.

Day by day across our yard, the hooves of desperate deer have scraped big swaths of snow aside just so they can nibble at the measly, withered remains of last summer's lawn. All this activity has morphed the yard into a snowy moonscape. Some of the dozens of large, random deer-dug craters measure up to five feet in diameter. The snow blanket between the craters and over the entire lawn is heavily pocked with sunken hoof prints. They meander and crisscross in every direction; evidence of the futility with which the deer seek even the most marginally-palatable plant matter.

As the late afternoon light begins to wane I step out the door with a cup of seed to scatter for the birds – a last meal to help keep them warm through another sub-zero night. As if a dinner bell had been rung deer materialize from the woods. They know the drill and step through the snow toward the house with wary anticipation. Within a minute after I scatter the seed and slide the glass door shut behind me the small band of does and semi-grown fawns are on the scene.



Timid deer turn bold when driven by hunger in these conditions. The seed on the ground lures them to only a few feet outside the window, night and day.

Normally cautious and easily frightened, hunger necessitates boldness. They step so close to the window I can discern every hair on their backs. I watch them from this unprecedentedly-close vantage as they feed. Their muzzles seem to vacuum the freshly-poured seeds out of the snow. Every now and then one raises its head to suspiciously eyeball the human face behind the glass, a layer of snow and seed plastered to its wet snout. Ten minutes later the deer have moved on. The birds return to slim pickings in the dusky light, so I step out to pour another cupful for them.

By first light, of course, the ground around the feeders has once again been vacuumed clean by the deer. Some impressively selective suction was employed in the process. The many rabbit turds and empty sunflower shells accumulated and embedded in the snow are left in place.

I step into the morning dusk's slaty gloom. The bitter cold bites my face and prickles my nostrils as I spread yet another cup of mix in a line across the top of the tortoise pen's brick wall. Within seconds the first sparrows are on the scene. Individuals rapidly materialize from hidden roosts onto the freshly-seeded surface. After a twelve-hour fast the horde pecks with frenzied urgency.

Check out a video of the moment on Nature Discovery's Facebook page. You can even count them as they descend to dine. Over sixty enter the scene in less than a minute.

-Jim McGrath

Nature Discovery

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Anticipating a cricket or worm our leucistic tiger salamander emerges troll-like from its cave.

**Visit Our
Nature Center
by Appointment**

**Suggested Minimum
Donation: \$5/person/hr**

The sky's the limit for natural science learning here – with a Michigan twist! Adults, couples and individual families are welcome to schedule an intimate indoor or outdoor visit to what we call “The Biggest Little Nature Center in Michigan,” and “Home to the Largest Zoo of Michigan-native Reptiles and Amphibians.” The unique, in-person, hands-on experiences here are unrivaled at any other nature center or zoo! We will bring snakes, turtles, frogs and salamanders out of tanks to interact with adults or students of any age or grade-level.

Identify and feed “the grand slam of Michigan turtles” - all ten species native to our state! Meet, pet and feed “Milberta”, our always hungry Red-footed tortoise.

Handle any or all of Michigan’s three species of garter snakes while learning how to tell them apart, then watch them gobble worms. Hold or “wear” a gentle 6-foot Black Ratsnake – the largest in the state!

Many more snakes, turtles, frogs and salamanders to identify and feed. Identify birds at the feeders. Take a guided walk on our trails to identify birds, trees, vines, and invasive plants.

Ask about arranging a special evening visit. Weather-permitting we can step outside and attempt to attract a wild screech-owl with recordings.

Contact us for additional information or to make an appointment most any day.



View up-close tree sparrows and more at the feeders out the window.

Around Area Schools in February

- ❖ Thursday, February 12: 6-8pm. *MI Snakes Exhibit; Kinawa 5-6 School Science Night, Okemos.*
- ❖ Thursday, February 19: 6-8pm. *MI Snakes Exhibit; Hiawatha Elementary STEAM Night, Okemos.*
- ❖ Thursday, February 26: 5:30-7:30pm. *MI Snakes Exhibit; Ralya Elementary STEAM Night, Haslett.*



Volunteer at Our Nature Center!



Handling a hatchling Eastern Hognose.



A view to Nature Discovery's lower level menagerie.

Join our mission! Whether you're a high school student, a retiree or any age between, our home-based nature center can use your help.

Assist in...

- * maintaining the many members of our huge zoo of Michigan-native reptiles & amphibians
- * upkeep of the nature center rooms and displays
- * seasonally-specific upkeep of outside grounds and trails
- * invasive species removal
- * educational interaction with visitors

Trained volunteers have an opportunity for a paid part-time employment positions. Make an appointment for a preliminary, in-person visit/orientation today.

A heartfelt 'thank you' to all the supporters who have valued our mission throughout the years, including these most recent donors...

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Heather Cox Richardson: Letters from an American

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GM, you're out! We're buying from more environmentally and socially responsible automakers.

<https://insideclimatenews.org/news/13022026/endangerment-finding-repeal-affects-ev-transition/>

-JM

The next generation would be justified in looking back at us and asking, “What were you thinking? Couldn’t you hear what the scientists were saying? Couldn’t you hear what Mother Nature was screaming at you?” -Al Gore

I don’t want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. I want you to act. I want you to act like you would in a crisis. I want you to act like your house is on fire, because it is. - Greta Thunberg

The personal actions that cut climate pollution fast are to go flight-, car-, and meat-free. Start with the one that feels most feasible for you; if you can’t totally go without, aim to cut your consumption today at least in half. – Kimberly Nicholas, Under the Sky We Make

What if we had storytelling mechanisms that said it is important that you know about the well-being of wildlife in your neighborhood? –Robin Wall Kimmerer

Study nature, love nature, stay close to nature. It will never fail you. – Frank Lloyd Wright

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