

Winter Birds are an Early Christmas Gift

LINDA S. KOLLETT

Christmas is almost here and the winter migration is well underway as birds that breed in the Canadian forests head south – to Massachusetts - for the winter. Soon I'll be hearing "Old Sam Peabody" (or "O-sweet-Canada") from my feeders, and sure enough, the white-throated sparrows will be out there. In Canada they prefer the edges of deciduous or coniferous forests and breed in secondary growth areas that follow logging activities. Here in Norton, they are familiar birds in fields, woodlots and backyards. They are easy to spot, with a large white patch on the throat. They have prominent striping on their heads. Some are the tan-striped variety and some are the white-striped variety. Interestingly, tan-striped birds always mate with white-striped birds, and there are usually equal numbers of each. Scientists like to study them as not only do they look different, but they exhibit different kinds of behavior as well! I like to think of them as an early Christmas present, but only one of many flying in during the season.

Winter robins are also arriving. Robins can be so confusing. We think of robins as a harbinger of spring, yet we see them all winter. Chances are that the winter birds are a different set of robins that nest and breed in northern areas and come south to Massachusetts for the winter. Our summer robins breed in Massachusetts and then head south to warmer areas for the winter. Winter robins thrive on the fruits of cedars, hollies and other trees and shrubs with winter berries. Worms, eaten by our summer robins, are not available as they either die from the cold or borrow deep in the soil. Robins aren't very interested in eating from bird feeders, even if you try to entice them with special food.

And don't miss the slate-colored junco, dark gray above and white below, a sure sign that winter is on the way. They travel down from as far north as Newfoundland. These birds love the edges of coniferous and deciduous forests, woodlots, and backyards. They actually like millet, and are happy to clean up under a feeder, scratching around like small chickens.

These winter visitors join other birds that stay in the area year-round, like the black-capped chickadees, cardinals, tufted titmice,



Photo by Phil Zawasky

The slate-colored junco, a ground feeder, likes to eat seeds that have fallen from bird feeders.

red-bellied and downy woodpeckers and nuthatches. As we enjoy warm homes, party food and Christmas lights, life for a bird is not always easy in the winter. It gets cold outside, days are short and food sources for wildlife may be hard to find. Winter bird feeding can be fun and a good way to learn about different birds. Try to place your feeders in a protected area with shelter nearby. Look for foods that are high in energy. Sunflower seeds, particularly black-oil sunflower seeds are an easy-to-eat good energy source for birds. Safflower seeds are loved by downy woodpeckers, chickadees and titmice and avoided by squirrels! Nyger is a treat for goldfinches and will attract them in great numbers. White, not red, millet is enjoyed by many of the ground-feeding birds. Suet will attract woodpeckers, nuthatches and occasionally a chickadee or two. Peanuts are another high-energy food and are often mixed with suet.

And don't forget water! Birds need water all year round. An inexpensive birdbath heater will maintain an open water source in your yard even during the coldest days.

Open water is also important for large birds, like the Bald Eagle! Our local eagles have already returned and are fishing regularly in Norton Reservoir, replacing the ospreys. Ospreys are also skilled fishing birds that we are fortunate to see at the reservoir in warmer weather. They have gone south for the winter and won't be back until spring returns.

Eagles are powerful birds with wingspans up to 8 feet wide and strength to lift up to four pounds. In addition to fish, they also eat small mammals, water birds and carrion. Their eyesight is excellent – an eagle can spot a rabbit a mile away!

As Christmas approaches it is time to look out your window, or better yet, to go outside and enjoy the local winter birds. Think of them as Christmas presents flown in for your personal enjoyment. The Land Preservation Society of Norton encourages you to help ensure good habitat for present and future Christmas visitors.

Give yourself (or someone you know) a lasting and meaningful gift by registering your yard as a Certified Wildlife Habitat (a National Wildlife Foundation program.) Visit our web site <http://www.nortonlandpreservation.org/> or go to the National Wildlife Federation website: <http://www.nwf.org/In-Your-Backyard.aspx>

Linda S. Kollett is a member of the Land Preservation Society of Norton and of the Wild Backyards of Norton Team. You may contact Linda or the team leader, Kathy Ebert-Zawasky at zawasky@comcast.net