



It's For the Birds - by Rocky Wilson Isanti County Master Gardener

As I write this, we've already had our first snow and we're still adjusting to colder (not cooler) weather. I'm working on my winter to do list and if you're still working on yours; I invite you to include another item. There's still time to add the birds that live in your neighborhood year-round. Winter is especially hard on birds as food and water are more difficult to find on top of simply surviving the wind and cold!

So, if you enjoy our wintering friends; this is your late reminder! Chickadees, cardinals, blue jays, finches, sparrows, juncos, nuthatches, along with a variety of woodpeckers including the wary Pileated (pictured) are just a few of the visitors to bring you joy on a cold winter day! Saying "thank you" with their chirps and songs as you watch and wonder how they can do what they do and survive out there.

So, what needs to get done (if you haven't already?)

- Clean your feeders. Even in winter moldy or bacteria laden seeds can cause disease. Brush away all seeds, especially hardened clusters. Can use a bleach solution of 2 ounces bleach with 1 gallon of water, hard brush it in, and let it dry (sun if possible or under a shop light).
- Move feeders closer to your house; better to watch them and it makes re-filling easier! I've found that it is easier to keep them filled and clean from driven snow if they are easier to get to! I even snow-blow a small path to them. You can also put them on your deck railing (secured though), but watch for cats and other predators.
- Clean your bird houses. You need to do this anyway for spring nesting, but birds can and will seek refuge from wind, wet, and cold in a variety of ways. If you're a builder you can even build a wintering roosting box. I found a simple plan from Woodworking for Wildlife/Homes for Birds and Animals (*1) that places the entrance hole towards the bottom to better capture warm air (as it rises). It also has a number of perches inside for birds to rest on. So there you go, a winter project!
- Bird Food! The overall best seed to buy is black-oil sunflower. They account for over 3/4 of my seed purchasing. I also use Niger thistle seeds for finches as well as a cardinal mix of sunflower, safflower, and peanuts. Suet is a great way to attract woodpeckers just outside my windows. Others feed on suet too; including those squirrels!
- Water! Surprisingly, wintering birds can have problems getting enough water. Last year I tried a heated bird bath and found it to be a gathering place for all kinds of birds throughout the winter. My solution: buy a bird bath de-icer from a local hardware store (for \$30). I simply brought a bird bath closer to the house, placed my de-icer in it, and plugged it in (to a grounded GCFI protected outdoor outlet) Worked all winter. You can also purchase a bird bath with a de-icer included.
- Simply leave up perennials with seeds such as coneflowers and black-eyed Susans. It's another natural food they look for.
- Gather and leave some brush piles near your feeders for shelter and cover from predators.

Join those of us who almost daily enjoy watching these wonderful creatures on what sometimes can be a long winter, and help more of them get through it. You will be glad you did.

Resources: Wild About Birds/ The DNR Bird Feeding Guide- MN DNR (Carol A. Henderson)

(*1) Woodworking for Wildlife/ Homes for Birds and Animals (Carol A. Henderson)

The Backyard Bird Watcher (George H. Harrison)

For more information, visit Isanti County Master Gardeners website at <http://isanticountymastergardeners.com/>, MN DNR Feeding Birds: <http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/birdfeeding/index.html/>, or call the Isanti County Master Gardeners at 763-689-8254.