

Home for the holidays *Winter birds flock to feeders across Ontario*

By: Gregor Beck

Gregor Beck is a wildlife biologist and co-editor of the new “Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Ontario” (www.birdsontario.org). The article is available for publishing at no charge, provided that Mr. Beck is cited as the author.

Cash registers at local bird stores have been ringing lately with the first blast of winter in southern Ontario. The mercury was falling as fast as the snow in many areas, and bird lovers changed gears on the fly from watching the fall migration to winter bird feeding. Stocking up on sunflower seeds and suet has become as much a seasonal ritual as stringing holiday lights as bird lovers prepare for cardinals, finches, nuthatches, woodpeckers and the like.

Winter bird feeding is big business, no doubt because it is the number one connection to nature and wildlife for thousands of people. For armchair naturalists and hardcore wildlife enthusiasts alike, being able to watch dozens of birds just outside the living room window during the cold months has a big appeal.

“Feeding birds in winter is a great way to connect with nature,” said Caroline Schultz, executive director of Ontario Nature. “It’s a fun way for families to observe wildlife up close and an exciting way to learn about the natural world. Birds tell us so much about what’s happening in the environment around us.”

While many species visit feeders with fairly predictable regularity, such as chickadees and goldfinches, there are surprising fluctuations in the numbers and species from year to year. These changes illustrate that bird populations are very dynamic. Many species’ distributions and abundance have changed not only as a result of food availability or disease, but also as a result of changes in the environment, such as habitat availability, pollution levels and even climate.

The new “Atlas of the Breeding Birds of Ontario” (www.birdsontario.org) illustrates the ups and downs of the province’s bird life in recent decades. The atlas explains and maps changes in bird populations, which explains much of what we see happening at feeders now. For example, the striking red-bellied woodpecker is expanding its range in Ontario, and can often be seen eating suet or peanuts at feeders. The northern cardinal has continued to expand into central and eastern Ontario, probably aided by winter bird feeding.

Even some birds of prey have increased in recent years. Sharp-shinned hawks have expanded their breeding range by 18 percent province-wide in 20 years, and Cooper’s hawks have increased by 44 percent, according to the atlas. Increases in southern Ontario have been particularly impressive. This reflects improved breeding habitat in some areas, adequate year-round food supplies, and diminishing levels of some pollutants, which had been negatively affecting populations.

“Observations from winter surveys, such as Christmas Bird Counts and Project FeederWatch, complement what we learned from the breeding bird atlas,” added Jon McCracken, national program director with Bird Studies Canada. “The citizen scientists who participate in these projects collect vital information about bird populations.”

For example, bird estimates from feeder watchers is helping scientists figure out why purple finches, and even non-native house sparrows, are declining. Atlas data shows that both species have declined by about 20 percent in 20 years.

Getting hooked on winter bird feeding is as simple as a trip to your local bird or outdoors store. Keeping feeders clean and well stocked once you start is important, and putting out fresh water daily can be as much of a draw as the food itself in some areas. You can enjoy the birds on the coldest or snowiest day of the winter, and if you're keen you can take part in bird research projects organized by nature clubs and conservation organizations. Any way you look at it, winter bird feeding is an incredible window on the natural world.

***Ontario Nature** is a not-for profit that works with over 140 member groups to protect Ontario's habitats and wildlife, and connect people with nature through research, conservation campaigns, education and public awareness (charitable registration # 10737 8952 RR0001). For more information, visit www.ontarionature.org.*