

# Friends

## GARDEN PARTY

friends.flowers.faith

### Snow Birds

By Tammy Borden

Winter is here. That means that most Ruby-throated hummingbirds have flown south to another whole continent, along with Baltimore Orioles, Rose-breasted Grosbeaks, Indigo Buntings and a host of other feathered friends we won't see until Spring or early Summer. But that doesn't mean we can't longingly peer out our kitchen window in hopes of seeing some other feathered delights!

#### WINTER VISITORS

Believe it or not, Wisconsin winters are a "retreat" for some birds. There are several species of birds that migrate south for the winter to Wisconsin from Canada. One of these birds is the very common Dark-Eyed Junco. It is a beautiful small gray bird with a white belly. It is normally found in flocks. They are easily recognizable at bird feeders, feeding on thistle, cracked sunflower and other smaller seeds. They are more often ground feeders. They love snow. I have seen them practically playing in a blizzard.



© Lang Elliott / CLO

Another winter visitor is the Redpoll, a member of the finch family. Redpolls will not visit every winter. In fact, I only saw them for one season about ten years ago when Canada was experiencing an unusually harsh & frigid winter. In these cases, Redpolls will migrate south to Wisconsin in search of food. When they appear it's called an irruption. It is almost like they are refugees in a foreign land.

White Throated Sparrows are another favorite sight on a dreary winter's day. They are commonly seen in winter in Wisconsin and at first glance may look like a plain old house sparrow. But not so! Look closely and you will see the white throat, yellow patches near its beak and the black and white stripes on its head. They prefer foraging on the ground rather than sitting on a feeder, so be sure to scatter some seed at the base of your bird feeder.



Goldfinches... "What?" you say. Many people believe that those "wild canaries" leave for the winter and are replaced with brown sparrows. Goldfinches remain in Wisconsin for the winter but lose their summer plumage. Continue to put out thistle seed for goldfinches and come spring, you will have a backyard of sunshine.

#### WATER

Rule number one: all living things need water, and providing a source for birds and other wildlife is critical in the winter months. Many heated bird baths are available from various retailers and can range anywhere from around \$30 to over \$100 depending on how fancy you want to get. The key if you get a bird bath heater is to make sure it is thermostatically controlled. This will help save on energy bills and only heat the water when temperatures are freezing. I have often looked out my kitchen window on a freezing morning to see birds perched all the way around my bird bath. It's a wonderful sight to see.

#### FOOD

Birds in winter need to maintain as much body fat as possible. So it's important to provide food that will help keep a bird's metabolism up to keep warm. One of the best sources of fat and protein for birds is suet. Keep lots on hand in the winter. Woodpeckers love it and their stark plumage adds color to your life.

Continued...

As far as birdseed is concerned, don't purchase inexpensive bird seed mix. Check the ingredients! Many mixes contain filler seeds like Milo and millet. A small amount of millet is okay, but Milo is a seed with an extremely hard shell that is almost impossible for most birds to open. In addition, it has very poor nutritional value. You can end up paying for and wasting a large portion of your seed mix. Personally, I just purchase plain old black sunflower seed for my larger feeder, and thistle seed for my tube feeder.

Remember to shovel away or press down the snow underneath feeders to help ground-feeding birds.

### **COVER**

An important aspect of birding in the winter is to provide protection. Small birds are more vulnerable to hawks and predators in the winter because there is less cover. Some of this may require planning ahead by planting dense shrubs, evergreens and wind breaks. However, a simple way for those who use real Christmas trees is to simply place your tree about 10-15 feet from your feeder after the holidays are over. Another way to provide protection is to make or purchase a roosting box. Smaller birds like chickadees will use them to huddle together at night when resting and to escape the winds. Other possible cover includes wood or brush piles.

Don't forget your feathered friends this winter! I've generally found that the more birds you have, the more birds you'll get! By feeding them through the winter you'll have a better chance in the spring of seeing new species dropping in to see what all the chirping is about!