

Preparing for Winter Birds by Ray Chancellor

The birding winter season is upon us and it is time to prepare to get the maximum number of birds in your backyards. This portends a nice change after the normal October slow period at backyard feeders. In fact, we move from the 87 species that we call our summer population to 147 species that make up our winter population. We are entering the very best part of the year!

This week marks the return of Juncos, White-throated Sparrows, and the American Goldfinches and Pine Siskins are not far behind. Juncos and White-throated sparrows are already here at many ground feeders. And yes, even Cedar Waxwings will be making a possible appearance on yaupon and privet bushes.

In particular, it is time to start ground feeding to get the early arrivals that tend to feed more on the ground, e.g. Juncos and sparrows. Ground feeding will bring in many birds that will not feed on elevated or hanging feeders.

It is also time to put out your suet feeders if you do not use them all year. Incoming kinglets, nuthatches, Orange Crowned Warblers, and all of our indigenous woodpeckers use suet feeders all winter. Suet feeders can add significantly to the number of species that will visit your backyard on a daily basis.

With American Goldfinches, it is important to put your thistle feeders up early. Putting them up now is based on the earliest arrivals of goldfinches but it may be Thanksgiving before large flocks arrive. The key is to have the early arrivals find and visit your feeder. They are one bird that if one finds the feeder; it will begin to sing what is called its "locator call". Once it sings, it brings others to your feeder, and soon you have many coming daily. You can hear them long before they come to feeders by listening for their locator call as they arrive and begin flying early in the mornings.

Following, if not preceding, the goldfinches will be the pine siskins. Some years we have eruptions where they outnumber goldfinches; other years their numbers are much smaller. But they too will come to thistle feeders in larger numbers.

Hummingbird feeders? Your probability of getting our regular hummingbirds is slim to none. But some years we do get Rufous Hummingbirds. They have been at the feeders on days with 22-degree morning temperatures. I leave a feeder up all winter hoping to get these beautiful little birds. If you do keep a feeder, be sure to clean it on a regular basis to prevent fungus growth that can affect the tongues of these birds. This fungus will prevent them from being able to eat.

The one item people forget is having a water source. We are entering our driest part of the year and sometimes birds have trouble finding water. A water source in your backyard is a welcome factor for many birds and will bring them to your yard.

Please share with new birders or those moving into the area not familiar with Texas birds or their ecology. Prepare now and enjoy all winter!