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12 WAYS TO
AID BIRDSHERE'S HOW TO HELP DELAWARE WILDLIFE
EAT AND STAY WARM DURING THE WINTER

Shannon Giordano Special to Delaware News Journal | USA TODAY NETWORK

Winter weather can be harsh on birds and other wildlife. Here are 12 ways you can help your backyard birds make it through the colder months, according to our Delaware Nature Society experts. And there's a bonus: You will be rewarding yourself with the added benefit of being able to watch birds all winter.



The American Goldfinch, this one photographed at a feeder off Sharp Road, is among Delaware's birds of winter.



FROM LEFT: A white-breasted nuthatch is seen at Bucktoe Creek Preserve. This fox sparrow uses thick vegetation at the edge of a yard. The scarce, beautiful bird can be attracted to a yard with a seed feeder and dense cover nearby, especially in a snowstorm. A downy woodpecker feeds on common mullein, a non-native plant it is probably pecking into for insects. A red-bellied woodpecker is seen at Bucktoe Creek Preserve. PHOTOS COURTESY OF JOE SEBASTIAN/SHAW AND NATURE CENTER

1 Leave a "brush pile" (a loose collection of fallen sticks and branches) on the edges of your yard or near your bird feeders to provide a safe place for birds to roost overnight or retreat into if they see a predator.

2 Save the fall cleanup for spring. Fallen leaves are nature's mulch. Rake them into your landscaped beds where they protect your soil and return their nutrients to it, and provide shelter for wintering fireflies, butterflies, toads and turtles. Birds and small mammals will search through the leaves for food, too.

3 Don't cut down any native long grasses or wildflowers with seed heads. Birds like to hang out in clumps of long grass during the day time for safety, and the seed heads on your native flowers serve as natural mini bird feeders all winter. Native bees also hibernate inside the larger flower stems.



The hermit thrush is a scarce winter resident, but likes to visit backyards with dense vegetation and especially those with fruiting native shrubs like American holly and winterberry.

For more info

As you watch the birds visiting your yard, go to the website of Wild Birds Unlimited, Hockessin's website for some great resources including a list of winter birds to watch for. Need to stock up on supplies for winter? Delaware Nature Society members receive a 10 percent discount at Wild Birds Unlimited on all bird feeders, houses, gifts and other products, excluding optics, chocolate and bird foods.

Join this year's Great Backyard Bird Count

Once all those birds are flocking to your yard, join in on The Great Backyard Bird Count, Feb. 15-18. Bird watchers of all ages all over the world participate in this event to create a real-time snapshot of bird populations. For more information, go to www.audubon.org/conservation/about-great-backyard-bird-count.



A mourning dove is a common Delaware winter resident that will come to bird seed on the ground. COURTESY OF JOE SEBASTIAN/ASHLAND NATURE CENTER

Birds

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4 Keep feeders and seed accessible throughout the winter. Make sure you clear snow from the tops of platform feeders and clear an area on the ground where you can scatter seed for ground-feeding species such as sparrows and doves.

5 Keep seed dry. When birdseed gets wet it begins to spoil or become moldy and these micro-organisms may spread to birds as they feed. Wet seed may also sprout, which makes it unattractive to birds. This isn't usually a problem with tube or hopper feeders.

6 Consider putting out some high-energy foods such as suet and peanut butter. Their high fat content gives birds a much-needed energy boost to make it through a cold winter night.

7 Provide extra food in bad weather as this is when birds need food most. Keep some extra feeders and seed on hand for when a winter storm moves in.

8 Provide plenty of water. In the winter, dehydration can be a big problem for birds since most water sources

are frozen. Birds also need water to preen their feathers correctly and without this their feathers do not insulate them well, which makes birds lose body heat faster.

9 Weatherproof your birdhouses. Layer in some dry grasses or wood shavings (not sawdust, as it retains too much moisture) to give birds a place to roost at night and seal up any cracks to cut down on drafts.

10 Place shelters facing south to take advantage of the winter sun and paint winter roost boxes dark colors to absorb the most heat. Do not paint summer nest boxes and bird houses to keep birds from overheating in the summer.

11 Protect shelters from predators. Remove perches and place shelters in isolated, safe areas. Consider using baffles to keep predators such as raccoons and squirrels from climbing posts.

12 Remember to clean feeders and bird baths regularly with diluted bleach to prevent the growth of mold or bacteria that could spread disease.

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The northern flicker is a fairly common woodpecker that will visit a suet feeder, but also loves berries on native trees and vines in winter. Poison ivy berries are a favorite food of this bird. COURTESY OF JOE SEBASTIAN/ASHLAND NATURE CENTER



The pine finch is a northern finch that is being seen in Delaware this winter in higher than average numbers. They normally visit feeders with "finch mix" containing nyger and small sunflower chips.

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