Creating a Winter Sanctuary for the Birds

Insects may have gone dormant; seeds are covered in snow and water sources could possibly be frozen for our feathered friends in the winter. Supplying food that is high-energy, such as seeds and suet, will keep birds flocking to your backyard winter sanctuary. Corn, safflower, sunflower seeds, and thistle seed will keep a variety of birds coming to your feeding station. I also keep suet out all winter in wire mesh feeders, and shelled peanuts for the Blue Jays and woodpeckers.

A bird seed block finishes out the buffet for my birds. The other day I noticed Miss Kitty running back and forth in front of the sliding glass doors leading out to the deck. I discovered that two little field mice have set up housekeeping under the seed block holder and were munching away with the birds!

Experts also recommend a good bird bath containing a heater to keep water thawed. Colder temperatures make it harder for birds to find water sources.

When creating a winter sanctuary for birds, the types of shrubbery you plant can provide shelter from predatory birds and the weather elements. Upright junipers, hemlock and boxwood are evergreen type shrubs that small birds can fly to for protection. Hawks and owls are smart and can spot birds congregating in a feeding area. Place your feeders near dense foliage, so that birds can fly to the feeder and then to the shrub. We have a large Norway Spruce that serves as our birds’ “staging area”.

Since we have a raccoon “problem” I do not leave filled bird feeders hanging overnight. I have found that simply sprinkling black sunflower seeds along the deck railing provides enough food for my flock each day. The birds fuss at me as I am sprinkling the seeds and sometimes fly right up to me before I am finished! We love watching the birds feed through the winter and take note of any new visitors. One day a hawk decided to take up residence on the railing. Thankfully he left after a few minutes.

If you are considering a project for the summer, you might want to go to ohioline.osu.edu and look for the OSUE Fact Sheet, Native Landscaping for Birds, Bees, Butterflies, and Other Wildlife (W-13-2002). Readers learn that a wildlife-friendly landscape is composed of four essential items: 1) food, 2) water, 3) cover or shelter, and 4) a place to raise young. To provide the most beneficial habitat for birds, bees, and butterflies, native trees and shrubs should be emphasized. Why native species? Native plants are adapted to local conditions and therefore require less maintenance (especially irrigation and fertilization). This Fact Sheet provides a large list of recommended native Ohio trees and shrubs you can plant to create a wildlife friendly backyard.

Here are some fun facts about Ohio birds (ODNR Division of Wildlife): 1) 413 species have been recorded in the state, 2) about 300 species occur annually, 3) three species that once occurred in Ohio are extinct: passenger pigeon, Carolina parakeet, and ivory-billed woodpecker, and 4) the smallest Ohio bird is the ruby-throated hummingbird, which weighs in at 3 grams, or about the weight of a nickel.

I have been tromping around the property checking for wildlife damage on my trees. I was amazed at all the deer tracks that went right past the front porch. It is literally a deer superhighway in our lower yard! The raised beds are covered with snow and I am anxious to see how the carrots and radishes are doing since it got so cold.

I am headed to the chair to browse through a new seed catalog. Are you making a list? And checking it twice?