



Birds In Winter

How do birds survive the cold, and what do they do in winter?

By Derek Matthews



Winter is a great time to watch birds, but it's a tough time for them as their survival skills are tested and food becomes hard to find.

As you walk around Vancouver and the lower mainland in the winter, you may be wondering where all the birds have gone. In fact, there are likely to be birds about, but instead of being evenly spread throughout the area, several species group together in loose, mixed feeding flocks. Flocking together in winter improves the chances of locating food, and huddling together during the critical night-time period helps conserve body heat.

Together, they improve their chance of survival, as

they are far more likely to spot a predator, like a Sharp-shinned or Cooper's hawk, before it's too late. Some species can also be seen moving to their night-time roosts. For example, you may have noticed the steady evening migrations of crows in Vancouver. They commute from their daytime feeding areas to their night-time roost in Burnaby, where as many as 14,000 individuals can congregate.

In winter, the most significant test for wild birds is finding food and ensuring they eat enough to build and maintain adequate fat supplies to store on the body and 'burn' for energy. This becomes even more difficult in harsh weather when snow and ice hide once readily available natural food. For example, waterbirds may be forced to leave iced-over lakes and rivers. The ground becomes too hard for birds like sparrows and juncos to probe, and natural food like berries and seed is buried.

Tough winter weather may mean a change in behaviour rather than a change of location. Birds have to feed at an accelerated rate but must also take adequate time out to rest and conserve energy. It is a delicate balancing act they cannot afford to get wrong. Like chickadees and kinglets, small birds have to effectively feed throughout the hours of daylight available in winter and consume a vast quantity of food. They consume as much as 30% of their body weight to make sure they build the necessary fat reserves to get them through the long, cold nights. Hoarders such as Steller's jays turn to the 'larders'

they prepared in autumn when food was plentiful and dig deep in the snow to find the stores of acorns and seeds they stashed.

You will almost certainly notice more birds coming into your garden during cold snaps, especially if you regularly provide food. Finding a consistent source of high-energy food such as a garden feeder is the equivalent of winning the lottery for wild birds. A well-stocked garden is a real lifesaver. Birds will become dependent on the food you supply, so it is vital to keep feeders clean and topped up. Providing a fresh, ice-free water supply is another cold-weather essential. Drinking and bathing are an integral part of birds' daily routines.

We hope you will decide to help birds in your backyard this winter. In doing so, you are sure to witness a flurry of activity first thing in the morning as they replenish energy lost overnight and last thing in the afternoon to prepare for the evening ahead.

For more information on caring for birds in winter, visit our [webpage here](#).



Red-breasted
Nuthatch