

Backyard Birding

... with Gail T. Whitehurst

It rather saddens me that many birders tend to turn up their noses at the backyard birdwatcher. I will admit that at first glance it does not appear to be likely spot for anything of interest to occur; but, believe me, some of the best and most unusual sightings I have ever had were right here in my yard. The most fascinating facets of bird behavior can be found on my own lawn, in my shrubs and treetops. Now it might be well to suggest here that just watching birds at a feeder can get old after a while. Once you learn what kinds of food various species eat, how they go about it, and which are the aggressors, feeder watching becomes rather dull.

If, however, you feed and attract the birds on a year-round basis, as I do, and spend as many hours as possible every day observing them, you come to see and learn much more about the individual species than can ever be done on a field trip. Now I love field trips and go every chance I get. It is exhilarating to go out to a lake on a crisp winter day and see ducks, gulls, and hawks. During spring migration it is a delight to spend a morning along a woodland stream and see and hear the many warblers coming through in migration. On cool fall days there is nothing more pleasurable than to tramp through wood and field looking for fall migrants. In summer, what fun it is to observe the shorebirds while on a beach vacation. If you desire to see as many different species as possible, then you must cover as many different kinds of habitat as you can. But, alas, life is not just one long field trip and most of us have to do our birding where we are.

The advantages in birding at home are many. First off, is the matter of identification. Birds seen day after day—in rain or sun, during the prenuptial and annual postnuptial molts, as fledglings and juveniles, in off-colored plumages (albinistic, melanistic, or oddly marked)—become easy to identify at a glance. You learn all the songs and calls, which do vary from bird to bird within a species. You learn the postures and poses and general behavior traits of individuals and species. When you know all these things well, then you are able to discern the presence of the stranger stopping by your place. A flick of a tail, a new note or song, a new shape perched in a tree or flying overhead will catch your eye and ear immediately, and you find yourself seeing the bird that others miss.

I think that long ago my neighbors accepted the fact that I am some sort of nut, daffy but harmless. Why? Because I rarely go outside without my binoculars. I am nearsighted and depend on them to see what birds are across the yard, under the hedges, or in the trees. It probably does appear odd to see me hanging up a wash with binoculars around my neck, but that passing migrant whose call I hear will not linger. Even when I work in the yard, the glasses are nearby. They rest on my kitchen counter when I am indoors, so I can grab them quickly to see what is feeding in the driveway. It is most frustrating to me to be away from home shopping or visiting and

not have those glasses handy when I hear or see something interesting. Now that, you say, is carrying things a bit too far. Perhaps it is, but I cannot help seeing and hearing birds everywhere I go—very distracting at times, I might add. I shudder to think of all I would have missed if I did not have the glasses handy.

To be really effective, the backyard birder must check all points frequently. It is not enough to watch the feeders. You need to be aware of what is going on on the lawn, in the shrubs and treetops, and even in the sky overhead. This last habit of checking the skies has allowed me to see Bald Eagles, many different kinds of hawks, gulls, vultures, cormorants, ospreys, flocks of ducks (not always identifiable by me), and many individuals or small flocks of birds just passing by. I have learned, also, to check the skies when the small birds give alarm calls or stop what they are doing and look skyward. I saw a Bald Eagle once when I noticed a Brown Thrasher intently studying the sky. Another time I noted a Blue Jay looking up. Following its gaze, I saw a Rough-legged Hawk. The frenzied shrieks and cries of Blue Jays, Common Grackles, and crows often alert me to the presence of hawks. Once I saw a Barred Owl fly from a tree that crows and jays were mobbing. When the shrill alarm cry sounds and all birds suddenly disappear and all becomes deathly still, I begin looking for the Sharp-shinned Hawk. Sometimes it comes so swiftly and silently that it can pluck a little bird away right before my eyes. A few times I have frightened a Sharpie away by reacting instinctively the same way I do when a cat appears—clapping my hands and shouting at the intruder. I have learned that it takes close to 10 minutes before birds will resume their normal activity after a Sharpie has passed.

During spring and fall migration, particularly during the peak times and following a cold front (in fall) or warm front (in spring), it is imperative that I stay outside as much as possible, for one never knows what might appear. Birds flying, flitting through treetops, or working their way along the ground can be found most everywhere during these times. True, they will be more abundant in proper habitat, but they have to keep moving and in so doing will be found out of habitat—cities and towns, highways and farmlands have broken up the countryside, until there is no such thing as a continuous perfect path.

Let me give you a few illustrations. In addition to the hawks, eagles, waterfowl, and shorebirds that pass overhead, I have had, in my yard such warblers as Bay-breasted, Wilson's, Canada, and Blue-winged as well as a singing Louisiana Waterthrush! I have seen Peregrine Falcons, a Merlin, and a number of American Kestrels pass overhead, not to mention Belted Kingfishers, Green Herons, Canada Geese, and a very large tern that may have been a Caspian. One early November morning, some years ago, we heard Great Horned Owls calling, and I was able to get out at dawn and see three of them take off from nearby pines! I saw a Red-shouldered Hawk, which wintered in the area, take a tiny squirrel from the side of a tree. Skywatching, one can enjoy the Chimney Swifts, Purple Martins, Common Nighthawks, and Barn Swallows passing over. Ground watching is equally productive for spotting visiting sparrows, Ovenbirds, and thrushes.

Then, of course, intensive watching enables the birder to see the hurt, banded, and unusually colored birds. From my backyard I have seen a partially albino American robin, Starling, and Yellow-rumped Warbler. This winter there has been an albino American Goldfinch. These birds and those during the various molts can be very confusing to one who does not know the birds well. There is much more than color necessary for proper identification. Not every bird looks like the pictures in the bird books. Females of many species, juveniles, and warblers in fall plumage require a trained eye and ear.

Another advantage, to me, in backyard birding is the fact that the birds that feed and breed here are accustomed to my presence. They go about doing their thing

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The list of endangered and threatened mammals, birds, fishes, reptiles and amphibians, mollusks, and plants is said to be correct as of October 1979. For each species there is a color photograph or drawing and text having the following topic headings: status, description, distribution, habitat and characteristics, and remarks. Where appropriate, there is a regional range map. A very helpful scale in inches and millimeters is provided for the photos of mussel shells. Seven endangered avian species are included: Peregrine Falcon (two races), Bald Eagle, Bachman's Warbler, Kirtland's Warbler, Brown Pelican (eastern race), Ivory-billed Woodpecker, and Red-cockaded Woodpecker. The range maps are the weakest feature in the book. For example, the range map for the Eastern Indigo Snake shows the race in extreme southern South Carolina without specifying, as does the text, that the area is in its historic range but not in its present-day range. A question mark would have been appropriate in the perfectly oval and obviously hypothetical South Carolina range of the Ivory-billed Woodpecker. Or, better yet, why not show the historic range with dots for modern sight reports? The two Peregrine Falcon range maps are at best confusing. Nevertheless, this is an attractive and informative booklet that should appeal to the general public.—EFP

CORRECTION: In a review of *Penguins* by Roger Tory Peterson (Chat 44:28), the writer inadvertently used *Arctic* where *Antarctic* obviously was intended.—ED.

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unafraid, and I am permitted to see behavior I would miss on a field trip. Perhaps one of the most interesting experiences is watching the behavior of juvenile birds. Once on their own, so to speak, they learn about their world. Some young birds display a great deal of curiosity. They use their mouths much as a human baby does to test things for edibility. They try out foods not normally associated with their species. They show interest in what other birds, the adults of their own or other species, are doing. I recall, for instance, watching a young Blue Jay fly up in a tree to look over a juvenile Red-headed Woodpecker that had appeared on the scene. The jay looked it over from all angles. Another time there were several Brown-headed Nuthatches making quite a fuss up in a pine. A young Cardinal flew up to investigate. Young birds play, running about and chasing each other, apparently just for fun and exercise. Once I saw a juvenile Carolina Wren watching an adult chipmunk gathering nuts and seeds. The bird made an attempt to chase the chipmunk, apparently inviting it to play. Of course the chipmunk was not interested. Another thing that has been fascinating to observe is what the young birds fear by instinct. They all appear to recognize the cat as an enemy, but ignore squirrels, chipmunks, and rabbits. Dogs cause them to get to a safe perch, but they do not scold them as they do a cat.

There is so much to see in your own backyard that I could not begin to tell the half of it. Just when one begins to tire of the same old birds doing the same old thing, the season changes—new birds come along, old ones leave, resident birds take up new activities.

If you know your everyday, garden variety of birds well, then you do not waste valuable time on a field trip (where you want to see something different, new, or unusual) tracking down a towhee or thrasher. When leaves are out on trees and thickets are dense, birding by ear makes the task so much easier and releases one to study the birds whose calls and songs are unfamiliar. Backyard birding is an excellent training ground for bird study of any kind. It can be interesting, exciting, and informative. Backyard birding is what *you* make it. So, if you haven't tried it, don't knock it!