

Backyard Birding

... with Gail T. Whitehurst

We have a riddle for you. When does looking ahead mean looking back? When you read this in the summer issue of *Chat*, winter birdwatching will soon begin. So, in looking forward to that best of all seasons for backyard birding, perhaps we might look back to winters past. See what others have discovered and perhaps you, too, can see the same—or even better sights.

The winter of 1980-1981 brought forth some reports of unusually colored birds. I read in the Raleigh newspaper of a yellow male Cardinal. A neighbor told me of an orange male House Finch, and later he showed up on my feeder. He was a pale orange where he should have been red! We had a bird the size and shape of a Purple Finch with the coloring of a House Finch. A hybrid?

There were birds that should not have been around at all. My brother who lives in Asheville, N.C., had a male Rose-breasted Grosbeak at his feeder on New Year's Day. John Fussell reported that a male Painted Bunting has wintered at a feeder in Morehead City for several years. They know it is the same bird because it has an injured wing.

The past winter was a good one for the many bright and colorful Northern finches. After an absence of a couple of years, everyone enjoyed seeing Pine Siskins again. These may be small birds, but they most certainly hold their own on a feeder, chasing away the Purple and House Finches, and even the much larger Evening Grosbeaks.

Highly visible in winter, birds do interesting things at feeders and birdbaths. Many a dreary and cold day can be "perked up" just watching them.

John Funderburg, Director of the North Carolina State Museum, told me of an observation he made following a heavy snowfall, a couple of winters ago. He had made a clearing in his back yard and scattered seed on the ground. The snow was wet and heavy, covering the tree branches. As it began to warm up a bit, large clods, or chunks, of snow would fall right in the midst of the clearing where the birds were feeding. He noticed that the birds continued to feed, never fearing the falling clumps of snow. In fact, they did not even seem to notice them. Some of these birds were immatures, and it must have been their first experience with snow. Now if he had chunked a rock or stick at them, they would have scattered immediately. How did they know the snow was harmless?

We never cease to be amazed that birds "know" what to fear and what is harmless. Even a tiny fledgling fears a cat. It will flee if a human or dog comes near. How about the immatures that seek cover when an accipiter flies over in winter even though they have never encountered one? Why are birds usually not afraid of squirrels, chipmunks, or rabbits? Is this an instinctive knowledge, or do they "learn" from other birds?

Those who get hooked on backyard birding in winter find their interest continuing into spring. Winter birds are mainly concerned with getting food and water and with grooming. Come spring, and a whole new set of activities begins. Thanks to two of our younger CBC members, we have some unusual items for early spring.

Melissa S. Sherer, Box 977, Cramerton, N.C. 28032, wrote us: "On April 2 a Downy Woodpecker flew from its regular perch on a suet bag to a hanging cactus plant. After carefully landing, she began to peck on the cactus. She was eating it! I wondered if this has ever happened before. It was so funny that I couldn't help laughing."

John Sneed, 6305 Gadwall Court, Wilmington, N.C. 28403, sent this in:

"On May 12, 1981, I was observing parent Tufted Titmice nesting in my back yard when I noticed a truly unique ritual. Before entering to feed the young, the two birds perched on top of the nesting box I had erected. The male carried a long, green caterpillar in his bill, but the female had nothing. As I watched, the female gently took the grub from the male's mouth and uttered a few soft notes. The male then 'reached' out and pulled it back to his mouth. This procedure was repeated for 5 minutes until the female finally took the caterpillar and entered the box. Throughout the ritual both birds didn't seem angry, on the contrary ... both seemed to be experiencing ecstasy, and quivered with excitement. I never saw this again nor could I find it mentioned in Donald Stokes' book, *A Guide to Behavior in Common Birds*. I would like to hear if anyone has seen it in titmice or any other birds."

The more you watch, the more you see. And, the more you see, the more questions you will ask. This leads you to keep on watching, reading, asking other birders—and, we hope, sending your observations so that all of us can learn.

Another good thing about winter birds—they do not create any problems for the vegetable garden! We do have problems in spring and summer. Granted, birds destroy a goodly number of insect pests. But, they like to partake of the fruits of our hard labor. For instance, House Sparrows simply adore lettuce from the minute it comes up. They bit off huge chunks of it right before our eyes. Brown Thrashers tend to pull up the first beans that sprout—guess they think the little shoots are green worms! Thrashers, catbirds, and robins dearly love tomatoes or any other fruit one chooses to grow. So, what do we do? We put chicken wire or netting over the threatened goodies, and it is usually pretty effective. Occasionally a bird will get through an opening in the netting, and we have a dickens of a time getting it out. Naturally, a bird will panic when it realizes it is caught. When you approach, it begins to race about in a terrified frenzy. Somehow, we manage to make an opening large enough for the bird to see, herd it in the right direction, and let it escape with no harm done.

Recently, we spent considerable time and effort putting a net over our pear tree, which is full of fruit. We thought we had the net well tied at the base of the lowest limbs. A day or so later, I went outside in the evening. There, inside the net and trying frantically to get out, were two titmice. The closer I went to the tree, the more excited the birds became. I had to untie the net so the birds could get out. While I was working on this, one of the little fellows clung to the net above my head and tried to bite his way out. Before he could do so, however, I had made an opening that he could see. In a flash, both birds saw the hole and were out and gone. The opening through which they had entered the net was very small, next to the trunk of the tree. They must have crept up the trunk, searching for insects. I rather suppose these two birds will stay a way from the pear tree. I re-tied the net, this time making sure there was absolutely no way a bird could get inside.

The following day, I noted an adult Brown Thrasher walking about under the net over the lettuce bed. A tiny fledgling was outside, looking in and whimpering. Now the adult bird has been around several years and is one of my so-called "pets." It is not afraid of me and seemed to realize that I meant no harm as I approached. It waited patiently as I lifted some rocks holding down the net, and then walked out as calmly as you please. The little one was frightened, though. I tossed the old bird a bit of food and the baby followed its parent to a safe spot where it was fed. I found where the thrasher had entered and secured the place so that neither it nor the wee one would make that mistake again.