

Winter Bird Watching

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SPEAKERS

Speaker 3, Christa Hartsook, Heidi Anderson, Olivia Hanlon



Christa Hartsook 00:15

Hello, and welcome to the Small Farms Podcast, a production of the Small Farms Program at Iowa State University Extension and Outreach. Our podcast covers the opportunities and challenges associated with rural life.



Olivia Hanlon 00:29

In this episode I visit with Heidi Anderson, Naturalist with Polk County Conservation and we are talking about winter birdwatching. I'm Olivia Hanlon, ISU Farm Food and Enterprise Development Education Extension Specialist and we hope you enjoy the show. Heidi, welcome back. We're glad to have you joining us again. Thank you. It's nice to be with you. Absolutely. So let's start out by reminding all of our listeners who may have missed your first episode, or they just don't remember what you do in your role for Polk County Conservation. Sure, I am a Naturalist and a naturalist is an environmental educator. So part of my job, I work with students either in the classroom or out in our parks, outdoors, doing activities. We also do quite a bit of education with the general public, either through public programs and events out in our parks, anything from talking about astronomy, to trees, to the wildlife that we see in our backyards. So I work with all different age groups and teach people how to enjoy the outdoors and learn about our surroundings. Wonderful. So along those lines today, we're talking about winter birdwatching. So let's start out with one of the biggest questions there probably is, what kind of birds will we see this winter and which ones will be the most common, whether it be in town or out on our acreages and farms? Sure, some of the most common birds that we're likely to see either in our backyards, or just our neighborhoods are some of those common songbirds. So you're thinking about cardinals, blue jays, black capped chickadees, white breasted nut hatches, and then we've got a variety of woodpeckers as well, that we can see downy and hairy woodpeckers are commonly seen in our neighborhoods as well. So those are all fairly common. Of course, we've got those house sparrows that no one really likes a whole lot. House sparrows are so common they're here year round, and they're not a very beautiful, pretty looking bird. They've got different colorations of brown on them, but they're here, and they'll come to your feeders as well. But there's other birds like mourning doves as well, that we can sometimes see, and trying to think of what other ones have I missed? Those are kind of like the common

ones that come to mind when I think about my backyard birds. For sure. So of those species, Heidi, which will stay around all winter here in Iowa? And which will we just see as they're passing through to someplace warmer like we all wish we were? Sure. So the interesting thing about birds in Iowa - so there's like over 400 different species of birds that can be seen in Iowa and a lot of those do just migrate through so they're not staying and nesting in the state. We have some birds that are resident birds that we see year round. Those are our blue jays, our goldfinches, our chickadees, many of our woodpeckers, even birds like owls are most of them are year round residents. But certainly there are some that just pass through on their migration route, and then there are some birds that come to Iowa just for the winter. So they spend their summers up north, and then they migrate south just you know, just to Iowa for the winter. And those are like our dark eyed juncos and those are small little charcoal color-ish birds that we often see it in our neighborhoods and around our feeders in the winter months. So we don't see them in the summer. So believe it or not, but Iowa can be a nice place to spend the winter for some birds. So there's juncos, there's other birds like snow buntings that again, live up north in Canada and spend the winter here as well. So it really just depends. A lot of our songbirds that we like to see at our feeders, are year round residents, certainly there are some that migrate south for the winter. You know, we think about hummingbirds. Many people enjoy feeding hummingbirds and they can't survive the winter here so they have to go south, but there are still a lot of birds that call Iowa home in the winter that are enjoyable to watch and feed year round. Yeah, so you've mentioned a lot of birds there, Heidi. How does the average person go about identifying birds that may come to their feeders? What are kind of some of the easiest ways to tell the differences? Yeah, there are kind of several things that I look at when I'm trying to identify the bird. First is usually color. We can pick out some of the colorations and so, some birds have different stripes or patterns on their wings, or their tail feathers. Some male and female birds have different colorations, but the color is a big clue. Blue, gray, red, yellow, just thinking about the color. The second thing is size. A lot of times knowing the size of the bird can be helpful. Is it smaller than a robin? Most people know what a robin looks like. Is it smaller than a robin? And then the other thing is a house sparrow, most of us know what house sparrows look like, and their size, is it bigger than that, or smaller than a house sparrow? Is it bigger than a crow? So thinking about some common birds that we know and comparing the size to one of those. The other thing is to listen, the sound that they make, each bird has its own unique, distinct call. Many birds have multiple calls or vocalizations that they make. A lot of times we just hear birds, we might not see them, and we can tell what bird it is just by listening to the sound. The other thing that I like to look at is I watch how it flies. Some birds have different flight patterns, where some birds might flap their wings twice, and then glide, and then flap, flap, glide. Some birds might flap, flap, flap, flap, flap their wings, some birds might fly in a straight line, some birds might fly like they're on a roller coaster, up and down, and up and down. It's kind of how goldfinches fly - they're kind of flying like they're going up and down roller coaster. So watching the flight, the size, the color, the sound, and then the last thing I like to tell people to be aware of is just your surroundings. Because we certainly wouldn't expect to see, let's say, a duck in the middle of the woods high up in a tree unless it's a wood duck and you're near water. Some birds are only found in certain types of habitats, whether they're a deep forest dwelling bird, or if they're a bird you would typically see around the water, or if they prefer more open grassland type habitats. So thinking about the surroundings, it doesn't make sense that that bird would be in that location. Yeah, that makes a lot of sense, Heidi. All of those were things I had thought about, aside from the flight patterns. That's very interesting and I guess I had never really thought to be able to tell the difference between those.



H Heidi Anderson 08:12

Yeah.

O Olivia Hanlon 08:12

So when we're looking at all of those things to help us identify the birds, Heidi, is there a good resource for people to be able to look those features up in to be able to tell them what species of bird that might be?

H Heidi Anderson 08:26

Yeah. There are a lot of great resources to look up on how to identify birds. A great website online that I like to use is called AllAboutBirds.org. That's a great, great site to check out. They have different pictures of each bird because some birds their feathers, change color from breeding season to winter. So that's the other thing about winters, a lot of times the birds have their more dull colored plumage, because it's not breeding seasons so they don't need those bright colors to be attractive to their mates. But this resource, they have pictures in the summer, in the winter, they have juvenile because sometimes the juvenile birds look a little bit different compared to a full grown adult. So they've got a variety of pictures there. There's also some great apps that I like to use. Audubon Bird Watching has a great app, and again, multiple pictures. These sites also usually have a call so you can listen to what they sound like as well. So Audubon is great. There's also Merlin ID. It's another app to check out. And then a fun app I like to use and this applies for more than just birds, but plants, insects, or animals. It's an app called Seek by Eye Naturalist, and you literally can take a picture of a plant or an animal and it'll bring up some suggestions or tell you what the name of it is. With birds, that's kind of hard because they are often moving around, so

O Olivia Hanlon 10:07

You can't get close enough to them. Yes, you can't get close enough to them. So that's sometimes frustrating. But you know, if you can get a picture of a bird, you can actually input it into the app and it'll hopefully give you some suggestions on what it might be. Okay, very cool. Thank you for sharing those with us. I think that'll be helpful for our listeners out there. So moving on, what should we be feeding these birds over the winter? And how frequently should we be feeding them to help them get through the cold winter? Yeah, so one of the best types of bird seed that we can offer and provide for birds in the winter is black oil, sunflower seeds. Nearly every bird that visits bird feeders will eat this seed. So it's a all around good purpose seed. It has a fairly thin shell to the seed, which makes it easier for some birds to crack it open to get to the the nut inside of that. It provides lots of energy and protein for those birds. So black oil, sunflower seed, if that's the only seed you can get, get that one. Another really good type of seed to provide for birds in the winter are peanuts. Woodpeckers, bluejays, nuthatches, chickadees, they all will eat peanuts. Just make sure you're not buying salted peanuts and putting them out there. You just want to make sure that they're dry, roasted and they're unsalted. You know, I've put peanuts out in a peanut feeder before at my house and like when the bluejays find it, literally within a day, it's like gone. Some birds, they're not eating all those seeds at once, like bluejays will collect seed and they'll stash and hide them in different spots

and chickadees will also do the same thing. They'll pick seed and they'll stuff it inside the bark of trees and they remember where they hide all of these nuts so that they can go back and feed on them when other food sources dwindle or disappear. Okay.

H

Heidi Anderson 12:20

So black oil, sunflower seed, peanuts, another good food to provide our his suet. Suet is just basically fat. That's really great for birds like woodpeckers. You can just even use an onion bag and sticks in that suit or fat in there and hang that, and the birds will feed off of that. That's something else to throw out. Thistle seed, Nyjer thistle seed, is great for the gold finches, thistle seed is real tiny, and goldfinches have tiny little beaks. So they just pull it out of the special thistle feeder. That's great for the finches. I would provide a word of caution of buying bags of mixed seed because there's good mixed seed and there can be bad mixed seed. So you just want to make sure that the mix seed has a good variety of seeds that most birds will eat. So make sure to scout some sunflower seeds, maybe some cracked corn, some white millet, and maybe some peanuts in it. Some of the cheap mix seed that we find has what's called Red Milo in that, and that's a seed that birds here in Iowa won't eat. So when you put bird seed in a feeder, birds will pick through and pick out the seeds they want and then you've got all this mess with the remaining seed and a lot of wasted seed the won't get eaten. So just just take a look to see what seed is in there. Then it doesn't have a bunch of what I would call filler seed in it. The other part of your question is, how often should we be feeding them?

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Olivia Hanlon 14:06

Yes.

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Heidi Anderson 14:06

So in the winter time, your bird feeding station or bird feeders provide a source of food for birds when they have trouble finding natural food elsewhere in their environment. They do kind of rely and keep coming back to that area, your bird feeding station. However, birds are used to natural food supplies disappearing and so then they'll move someplace where they can find food. So if you can continually feed them throughout the winter that's awesome, but don't feel terribly bad if the feeders run empty for a while because that is somewhat simulating what happens in nature, that some food supplies dwindle and they just move elsewhere. But it just depends how many birds are in your neighborhood, how quickly they go through the bird seed. If you can buy a bigger bird feeder, so you're not having to refill it as often that can be nice, but you do want to be careful about mold building up inside the feeder, if it gets wet, and you don't clean it out, it's just something to be aware of.

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Olivia Hanlon 14:08

Okay. Very good tips for us there, Heidi. So when we're looking at cleaning up our brush piles and things like that before winter hits, what would be nice for us to leave for the birds in terms of brush so that they can kind of make themselves comfortable this winter?

H

Heidi Anderson 15:27

Yeah, so what birds typically do is they need some place to hide in a little bit before they fly into a feeder. So you know, pine trees are a great place for birds to overwinter, they've got some shelter in there. Same thing if there's shrubs nearby, or even a tree nearby that they can perch on, or they can fly to and go there first before they fly into the feeder. So if you've got some sort of a brush pile or something, you know, 10-15 feet away from the bird feeding station or bird feeder, that would be good. You don't want to have a brush pile like right, right next to the bird feeder because there could be a potential for cats to also be there. You know, cats they like to hunt. So birds need a little bit of time to react, then they can escape if there's any potential predators nearby. But you know, after Christmas, if you've got a live Christmas tree, and you don't need it anymore, I've just set up that Christmas tree and sit it like 10 feet away from my feeder, because again, that's a pine tree and they can find a little shelter in there before they fly over to the feeders. So that can provide a little bit of shelter for some of those birds.

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Olivia Hanlon 16:55

Okay, that's awesome and another way to kind of get rid of our tree from the inside and have it help the outside.

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Heidi Anderson 17:01

Yeah!

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Olivia Hanlon 17:01

So is there anything else aside from maybe helping with some of that habitat and feeding our birds this winter that we can do to help them?

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Heidi Anderson 17:10

Yes, the other thing I would strongly encourage is to provide a bird bath for birds, you know, water freezes in the winter, and birds can get dehydrated. So if you have a bird bath, you're going to have to have a water heater to keep that water from freezing. There's a variety of different types of little heaters you can set in the bird bath, but I guarantee you if you've got a bird bath with a heater in it that has water in it, you will have birds attracted to your yard, no question about it, because they will come in to not only drink the water, but also just to take a little bath. They need to do that in the the winter months as well. So that would be a nice addition to a bird feeding station in your yard.

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Olivia Hanlon 18:01

Okay, is there anything that we did not cover today Heidi, that you'd like to add?

H Heidi Anderson 18:07

I don't think so. I guess one thing to also think about is just cleaning out your bird feeders. You know, if you have a lot of birds attracted to your feeders, and they're congregating continually in that space, there is a chance if a bird does have some sort of virus or disease or something, they could spread it in your bird feeding stations. So just washing and cleaning up your bird feeders with some mild bleach solution or something is a good idea to do. It's just a good practice to clean it up and clean those every once in a while to prevent the spread of germs or diseases amongst the birds.

O Olivia Hanlon 18:48

Okay, that makes a lot of sense, Heidi. Thank you again for joining us today. I really enjoyed having you on and thanks for all the helpful tips that you have given us and our listeners to hopefully have some outdoor enjoyment from the inside this year.

H Heidi Anderson 19:02

Yes, absolutely. You're welcome.

S Speaker 3 19:05

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