

A Look at Nature **“Birds of a Feather Flock Together”**

Winter is generally not the greatest time for bird watching in and around Eldora. The number of species and number of individual birds found in the area is less than half that of summer. The neotropical migrants (such as warblers, flycatchers, and tanagers) have flown south. Other birds have headed lower in elevation in search of warmer weather and snow-cleared ground. On the Indian Peaks Winter Bird Counts we have had participants spend 6 to 8 hours in the field only to find a single mountain chickadee; not a fun day for birding, but the skiing was great!

The dominant winter birds are our year round residents. One in four birds seen in the field will be a mountain chickadee. And the winter birding experience is one of feast or famine, with the latter taking the day. This is because most birds travel in flocks during the winter. Many birds form mixed-species flocks. Mountain chickadees are regularly seen with red-breasted nuthatches, brown creepers, golden-crowned kinglets, with a hairy woodpecker thrown in for good measure.

Why different species flock together is one of the mysteries of nature. But theories abound. Predator defense is one possible explanation. In fact, experiments have shown that downy woodpeckers foraging in mixed-species flocks seem to utilize mountain chickadees as sentinels. Feeding efficiency has also been hypothesized. A flock may have a greater chance of finding a rich feeding patch than a single individual.

What are they eating? Many of the resident birds are omnivores; they can feed on several types of food such as seeds and insects. Many of the chickadees, nuthatches, kinglets, and woodpeckers spend most of their time in the wild searching for the resting stages of insects (such as eggs and larvae). And each tends to specialize on a particular segment of the tree. Woodpeckers can drill deep into the bark. Nuthatches and creepers probe only the first inch or so of the bark layer. Hairy woodpeckers work on the main tree bole while downy woodpeckers look for food on the stems. Chickadees and kinglets work on the outer branches. So, the birds work together as a flock to find the riches, then split up to their particular niche. And their work to help control insect populations while searching for food in the winter is highly undervalued by people.

Our winter avian friends can most easily be viewed at a bird feeder. Typical “feeder junkies” include mountain and black-capped chickadees, red-breasted and white-breasted nuthatches, brown creeper, dark-eyed junco, Steller’s jay, hairy and downy woodpeckers, Clark’s nutcracker, pine siskin, American crow, and evening grosbeak. A few pine grosbeaks, denizens of the subalpine forests, have also found out what a treat is in store at some of the local feeders. And keep an eye out for others that feed on the smaller birds at the feeder, such as Cooper’s hawk and northern pygmy-owl; a good clue is when all the feeder birds scurry and get calm and quiet.

There are several races of dark-eyed junco, so visually they have a lot of color variation. Some of these races come here for the winter from breeding grounds as far north as the arctic. The gray-headed race is our resident junco; some locals call them “rust-backs.” Juncos feed primarily on the ground, shuffling back and forth in order to bring seeds in the ground to the surface.

You may see a large flock of several hundred birds circling around Eldora and visiting feeders. These will probably be rosy-finches. They normally live above treeline, but come down

in the winter in search of food. We have three different rosy-finch species that frequent our area. The natives that breed in the Indian Peaks are brown-capped. Gray-crowned rosy-finches come from Canada and Alaska. Black rosy-finches breed in mountain ranges west and north of Colorado. The flocks we see in the winter are generally a mix of brown-capped and gray-crowned, with a few black ones mixed in. And when they find your feeders, you will quickly go through bags of birdseed.

Evening grosbeaks are some of the prettiest birds of winter. Their yellow forehead and eyebrow, black cap, brown and yellow body, and black wings with white patches, are a treat that invites a close look. Their large bills (hence, the name grosbeak) are ideal for cracking large seeds, such as those from a mountain maple. Their local numbers have dwindled over the past 20 years, but their numbers appear fine in other parts of the Front Range.

Every winter there are always a few sightings of “odd-balls;” birds that should have migrated far away, but knew a good thing when they saw it, or maybe they were just too old and tired to make the journey. Sparrows lead the list of oddities. They generally winter in Arizona, New Mexico and Mexico. But each year there appears a song, white-crowned or fox sparrow at someone’s feeder. During mild winters, red-winged blackbirds and American goldfinches may be found.

Over the past 20 winters there have been several occurrences of a brown thrasher taking up temporary residence at the feeders in Eldora. They are slightly larger than a robin, reddish-brown above, streaked below, with a yellow eye and a slightly down-curved bill. They generally stay on the ground. They are eastern birds that reach their farthest western extent along the creeks on the plains. Why one would even think of spending winter in Eldora is beyond me, but some of us have been delighted over the years to see them at the feeder.

Resident birds have to tough it out over the winter. When it is cold at night and the wind is blasting away, while we are safe in our cabins, they are outside. They find a little sheltered site and stay in a tree or under a shrub. Some cavity nesting birds, like chickadees, nuthatches, and woodpeckers, will use holes in trees for shelter in the winter. Large, dead trees generally have the greatest number of cavities for winter shelter. One researcher found 50 nuthatches snuggled together in one tree-cavity; instead of a 3-dog night, we now have the 50-nuthatch night!

Unfortunately, many of the birds simply don’t survive the winter. Those that do will live to reproduce in the spring. And hopefully the numbers of newborn will be high enough to offset the losses of the winter and maintain the population.

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