

Winter Birding is About More Than Just Birds

by Phil Brown, Bird Conservation Director

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Evening Grosbeaks gather at a snowy feeder. photo © Phil Brown

I love winter. But, as a birder, December is a transition into the depths of a long and, often, quiet period.

The abundance of the breeding season is a distant memory. Migration has wound down for all but a few northern species, like the winter finches, which periodically materialize in large swirling swarms of pine siskins or common redpolls at backyard bird feeders. This winter may bring flocks of evening grosbeaks – chunky yellow, black and white birds which resemble oversized goldfinches. But in their absence, the winter is quiet, often predictable in terms of the bird life present, and aside from the activity at your bird feeders, it can be downright slow.

So, play the hand you're dealt and slow down in accordance with the natural world! Life is fast-paced. We're all too busy. The news is often negative; the holidays can be stressful, and seasonal affective disorder is a real thing for many of us. Luckily, for those of us drawn to the outdoors, even in our backyards, winter's reward is abundant if you know where to look and how to direct your senses.

Winter's Gifts

Perhaps appropriately, around the holiday season, winter presents us with gifts such as snow, which creates a new landscape for wildlife and fresh substrate for tracking animals, as well as new opportunities for interacting with these. But winter's real rewards aren't typically as demonstrable as a serene holiday card, nor do they possess the ease and comfort of a summer lake. These rewards are rarely as grand and photogenic as the spectacle of colorful fall foliage or the seasonal migrations of bountiful hawks or warblers. Winter's gifts, for me, are comprised of a series of smaller moments, ones that are often ephemeral and fleeting. You will have to dig a little deeper to find winter's gifts, so dress warmly, grab your pack and binoculars and step out the door!

Establishing a regular, weekly pattern of immersing oneself in nature will help you see the winter as a dynamic season with smaller definitions of change in the natural world rather than as a homogeneous, endless period of cold and dark. Our nine-to-five schedules and other commitments don't make this an easy task. Still, numerous studies demonstrate the health benefits of slowing down, watching birds and establishing a connection to nature.

You may learn to understand the subtleties of winter, the freeze and thaw of rivers, the changing cast of characters at the bird feeder, or the signs of spring that start nearly as quickly as the return of daylight that follows the winter solstice. You may hear (as early as January) the backyard chickadees and cardinals begin to sing their "spring songs" or witness the sign of subnivean (between the snow and earth) mammalian life following a snowstorm. Follow fox or deer tracks to see where they lead you and watch how various weather conditions influence their interactions with the natural world over the weeks. You may notice that humans share similar patterns.

Tracking is for everyone; it's not all about knowing what species they belong to, but finding out whose trail it is may be a fun hidden surprise of your explorations. Your newfound knowledge will connect you better with your wild neighbors and may empower you to act to protect them. You will begin to see that, despite however cold and snowy it seems, no two weeks are exactly the same and that change is truly the only constant in nature.

Be aware that beauty can be taken in with all the senses. Trees are a good example. Appreciate their unique beauty and learn about the variability between and within species. Listen to the wind howl through their branches, frozen sticks crashing into each other like the antlers of deer. Some species have a unique smell (and even taste) and medicinal and herbal uses, and the texture of their bark is

quite variable and, in some cases, even a distinguishing field mark. You may learn to recognize the sponginess of a rare black ash tree bark or find the simple delight in running your hand along the furrowed grooves of an Eastern white pine. Be a little more childlike and curious in your approach to interacting with the natural world, and you will receive its gifts.

An Opportunity to Study Bird Behavior

Winter is the time to go deeper into the study of bird behavior. Really watch and listen to birds. You can learn about their behaviors, vocalizations and voices by practicing regular “sit spot” observations. These don’t have to be long or uncomfortable hours of stillness exposed to the elements. A sunny spot early in the day near a wetland or woodland edge will result in heightened bird activity. With focused attention and intention, even five minutes here or there can provide a representative view and allow for a connection to even just one spectacle or act (and you can even do this through a window). Maybe you’ll find yourself making your own weekly migration in search of changes, patterns in the natural world. 🐾



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