

WINTER BIRDS.

by

Margaret Herdliska
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Winter is the best time of year to start a study of birds. This is true for a number of reasons: (Sara Menaboni)

(1) Species are limited so that there are not so many to learn (around 60). You are far less apt to be confused and will have a feeling of success. The limited numbers is a distinct advantage. There are 374 species in Iowa (including sub-species).

(2) Most of the winter birds can be enticed to the feeder for study so that winter cold doesn't need to interfere with the study.

(3) Birds are all in adult stage and thus more easily identified. You do not have the problem of young that do not look like the adult nor the molting phase of the adult which sometimes throws one off the track.

(4) Bareness of the trees is a help to study and observation. In spring and summer foliage becomes so thick and dense that it is often impossible to identify many of the birds except by their song.

(5) You have a starter for next spring - you already know many residents.

Whether you are starting your bird study or continuing a hobby of long standing, winter birds have much to offer us. When so much of outdoor life is at a standstill, it is thrilling to watch these little balls of feather and down in their busy life on the tree trunks, in the bushes, along roadsides, or at our very window sills.

I would like to start with those birds which are with us all year long. We may not have the same bird all year, but we have some member of his tribe. They are permanent residents but have seasonal movements. This is true of starlings for an example. The same area has different species at different times of year. Lengthening and shortening of light day is part of the reason.

(Check List of Iowa Birds. Jack Musgrove, Museum Director, State Department of History & Archives. Represented by specimen; no list admitted to a state list unless a specimen has been taken.)

English Sparrow (not protected by law)

He is here to stay. In just a century he has spread to practically all parts of the U.S.A. In nature the strong survive. This fellow has adapted himself well. He is hardy, he'll eat a variety of foods, he is immune from natural enemies, he raises many broods a year - 3 at least - and is aggressive. You may not like him; but you might as well learn to live with him. And in the winter when other birds are scarce, he doesn't seem quite so bad, his friendliness is a little more appreciated. Perhaps we have overlooked some good qualities, too. I have watched flocks of them feeding at long intervals on weed seeds in gardens and along roadsides. Jack Musgrove stated last summer that there seems to be mounting evidence that the English sparrow is proving himself a good citizen in insect control.

If you don't want him at your bird feeder, hang a cloth or something that will flap near it. He is a scary individual and will fly at the least movement near him. Don't put out bread crumbs. He is a little in awe of the covered feeder or of one that can sway in the wind.

Although widely distributed as a species, individuals and flocks have an extremely narrow range, each flock occupying one locality and confining its operations to that particular territory. The differences in male and female are confusing.

The Starling. (not protected by law)

This is another introduced bird. I understand someone brought him to the U.S. to help control the sparrow. What a mistake that was. Now we need something to control the starling. But like the sparrow, we've got him and he is here to stay. I remember reading a Department of Agriculture Bulletin about the starling when I was in College, and I had never seen the bird. It's range didn't include Iowa, yet at that time. Now a little more than twenty years later he is here in numbers large enough to make him a real trial. He is even difficult to identify because he has so many calls and so many changes in appearance. He can mimic nearly everything. I kept hearing a bob-white on my way to school and learned to my chagrin that the quail was a blackbird with a large white bill. That same year Mrs. Hayward experienced the same thing at about the same place. It must have been an individual bird which had learned that call. Some of the birds this last year sound as if they were whistling at the girls. I hope they don't get any of you menfolk in trouble! As to plumage,

Mrs. Menaboni says, "If, in 1890-91, people had left starlings in Europe where they belonged and where there were natural enemies to keep them from becoming too numerous, we would have no problem today in America from this introduced species. Tampering with the balance of nature is the fault of man; it is no fault of the starlings, who should never have been transferred forcibly to a continent that would be ideal for their multiplication." (p.26)

Edward Forbush has written that the starling can do a great deal of good as an insect-eater, and at the same time do a great deal of harm to cultivated crops, especially fruit. The greatest objection is that it competes with native birds for food and nesting sites. Very few birds can outwit and outfight him. He is powerfully built, has a long, strong bill, is courageous, and can outsmart the sparrow and many other birds.

At home we aren't bothered with starlings at the feeder, because they seem to prefer the table scraps put in another place.

Black-capped Chickadee (5-1/4")

One of the first birds to visit your feeder will be the black-capped chickadee. He is a very friendly little ~~soul~~ soul, and very trusting. When I went out to replenish our food supply in the apple tree, the chickadee stayed in the tree and began feeding before I left. Even on the coldest days they sing as happily as can be, - chickadee-dee, or just dee, dee, dee. One author calls him the feathered small boy of the woods from the way he frolics and frisks from tree to tree, happy and care-free, laughing and joking. It was this little fellow whose presence on the window-sill challenged Ada Govan to a new interest in life. She has suffered a severe injury and was in a wheelchair, very depressed at having to give up her active life. Her interest in this one bird started a most interesting hobby of bird feeding and helped her to recovery. Wings at My Window is Mrs. Govan's story. In this book she describes the chickadee as a "tiny gray sprite, his jaunty black cap pulled low over his eyes and a black muffler knotted snugly under his chin - buffeted by the gale, thickly powdered over with the fast-falling flakes, singing at the top of his lungs - chickadee-dee-dee."

One call might be misleading. When I first heard the Pewee call, I looked for the Wood Pewee. It is stronger, louder, and not as much of a wail as the pewee's.

I had an interesting experience with this bird this summer. While visiting with the neighbors near their grape arbor I kept hearing the chickadee-dee-dee but I couldn't locate the bird. I raised up the leaves of the grapes, looked in the rhubarb, and finally decided the sound was coming from inside the steel post beside me. Looking down into the post I could see the adult bird sitting on her tiny nest down about a foot from the opening at the place the horizontal pipe was welded to the upright post. ~~Was~~ watched the nest for some time, never seeing more than one baby bird. One day the nest was empty and I often wondered how the little fellow got out, for the opening at the top was extremely small, being divided by a wire, and the sides of the steel post gave nothing to cling to. But get out he did, and I don't wonder that he can hang upside down while feeding at the end of a swaying branch or hang ~~by~~ his toes on a piece of hard suet.

Food: sunflower seeds, nut-meats, suet, peanut butter, crumbs, cereal.

Nuthatch (6")

Here is little yankyank scolder of the nuthatch family. This is the bird that the children so often tell me they saw when they saw a "blue-bird". And he is blue-gray in color in the right light. I love to hear these little fellows working their way around a tree or head-first coming down it, scolding all the while. So often I can hear them before I can spot them, but they are so active they come into view before long. They do not use their tails as the true woodpeckers do, and appear to be walking around rather than moving with noticeable jerks. With his pointed rather slender bill the nuthatch searches crevices of bark for insects which make up over half of his food. Nuthatches will eat soft-shelled nuts like acorns and corn. They often stuff a piece of food between pieces of ~~xxxxxx~~ bark and then eat it. They like suet, sunflower seeds, acorns, peanut butter, nutmeats, and corn.

The following is an excerpt from Birds of America III, p. 202: "One of the nuthatch's most engaging qualities is his friendly curiosity. Stand or sit motionless near the base of a tree in which the bird is working, and he is almost certain to come hitching down the trunk, head foremost, to gaze squarely into your face with his beady little black eyes and inquire politely as to your health and whether all is as it should be with you. If you inform him quietly that you are very well and quite content with your lot (being careful meanwhile to make no movement of any kind) he will express his satisfaction courteously, apologize for being so tremendously busy, and whisk away to the next tree."

Tufted Titmouse. (6")

My little five-year old nephew calls this the Peter-bird from its call of peto, peto, peto, or Peter, Peter, Peter. This call is quite loud. The first time I "heard" it I followed the bird (in Fairfield) for five or six blocks trying to identify it. I say the first time I heard it, meaning the first time I realized I heard it. The birds are quite common in my home, as many as three appearing at one time in the apple tree which has the feeder in it. I recall a statement of John Burroughs that "you will not see birds in your yard until you have birds in your heart". Perhaps we could substitute the word hear for see in this case. You will see and hear this little fellow if you give yourself half a chance. Just put out some nutmeats or peanut butter and he'll be around. We gather many nuts in the fall, and

every time we crack them we save the fine pieces for the birds. Just wire a sardine can to a treelimb, put these nutmeats in, and in no time the titmice start competing with one another for the food. Once in a while the chickadee can budge them out of the way for a turn, but the titmice are really hoggyish sitting in the middle of the container. They have the brightest eyes of any of the birds we watch. Perhaps they appear that way because the eye region is white, setting off the eye. The birds are very active, and are often found with the chickadees and nuthatches. They seem to like each others' company and are a saucy lot. No wonder dark winter days seem brighter when you are a bird-watcher!

Cardinal. (Federal protection first in 1950).

This fellow is really a beauty. The red coat helps to brighten up a winter landscape. An ear of corn tied to the trellis keeps him with us most of the time. I have often read about how chivalrous the male cardinal is feeding his mate and so on. I think this must be only during the nesting season because I see no evidences of it during their winter feeding. The lady must wait meekly until her lord and master is through feeding before she dares get a grain. If she flies up too close to him before he is through he takes a dive at her and chases her back on the lower part of the trellis where he thinks she belongs. She may dare to pick up a crumb or two he has dropped on the ground but that is all.

Not many years ago the cardinal was rare in Iowa. In William Ross's Bird Notes mention is made of traveling some distance to see the cardinal. They got not only to see it but hear it sing. Now we expect to have a pair of cardinals around our yard and more or less take them for granted. However, if food and cover is not plentiful in our yards and gardens the cardinal may take to the woods and live in the tangled thickets and underbrush along streams and in ravines. In my notes, I have, on a trip in February, listed nine cardinals and nine blue jays in the region along the drainage ditch and then across the road and through the woods south of the golf course. If you want these aristocrats of the bird world to stay around in the winter, put out corn on the ear or sunflower seeds, and plant bushes and vines for shelter.

The cardinal is held in high regard all over the country. In Virginia he belongs to the F.F.V. ("First families of Virginia"). Five states list him as their state bird: Illinois, Indiana, Kentucky, North Carolina, and Ohio.

Blue Jay. (11 $\frac{3}{4}$ in.) (No federal protection)

The blue-jay is a beauty and a rascal. He is colorful enough to be appreciated for this alone even if he can't be excused for his treatment of other birds. He is a nest robber, eating the eggs and the young of smaller birds. This very bad habit may serve a useful purpose according to one author. The birds that were robbed usually lay again, thus prolonging the nesting season. "If all the birds in a given area had their eggs and young at the same time, a period of bad weather would result in a total loss of young birds for the entire year. Therefore, a protracted nesting season with eggs and young at different times insures more successful reproduction." Another good result of the yaj's activities is the growth of native trees from the food the jay buries: oak, chestnut, beechnut. Of course the jay isn't conscious that he is doing a job of reforestation, but the result is the same.

Do you know the different calls of the blue jay? I have been fooled by him many times and expect I shall be again. He has his raucous call of thief, thief, which most of us know. Then he has one that sounds to me like a rusty pump. Chief Dorothy called it the "pump handle" call for another reason: the bird seems to have a hard time getting the sound out, and pumps his head up and down as he utters it. Once last summer we thought we heard the red shouldered hawk and ended up finding a blue-jay doing the calling; so we find he is a mimic, too. He has another call which is somewhat musical.

Food: sunflower seeds, suet, nutmeats, peanut butter, crumbs, oatmeal, peanuts.

I always think of Mark Twain's story "Bakers Blue Jay Story" when discussing jays. As you recall, one jay kept trying to fill up a hole with acorns, but work as he would the hole wouldn't fill up. Another jay came along and discovered that the hole was a knot-hole in the roof of a cabin. He enjoyed the joke and passed it along to the rest of the tribe who sat around in the trees noisily chiding the unfortunate bird who thought he had found a "hole". Now, I suppose one can't attribute human characteristics to birds, but that is the way jays seem to act. They get together to badger and annoy other birds and appear to be getting a kick out of it. James Whitcombe Riley describes the arrogance of the jay in Knee Deep in June.

Mr. Blue Jay, full of sass,
In those baseball clothes of his,
Sportin' round the orchard jes'
Like he owned the premises.

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Hawks.

Here is a bird that feeds entirely on flesh and is one of Iowa's most beneficial birds. He is not a chicken hawk; in fact there isn't such a bird. This hawk pictured here is a red-tail. It is common in Iowa in the spring, summer, and fall. How about winter? In the Ames booklet Common Hawks and Owls there is this statement, "If you see a large hawk in the middle of winter, it may be a rough-leg or a red-tail. It is not uncommon to see either of these birds in winter throughout Iowa". Both of these belong to the large group called buteos, which have broad wings and ride the soaring air currents circling around high in the air. In the January issue of the Iowa Conservationist, J. Harold Ennis of Cornell College has an article asking for conservation of hawks and owls. Quoting from that article, "Examination of the stomach contents of 202 'rough legs', or winter hawks, showed that none consumed game or poultry, but 84 per cent consumed mammals. This misunderstood bird is clearly a 'mouse hawk'. The stomach contents of 2013 'red tails' revealed that again 84 per cent consumed mammals, 11 per cent poultry or game, 19 percent other vertebrates, and 9 per cent insects. Studies have shown that red-tailed hawks are worth annually over \$25. apiece to the Iowa farmer." These hawks live largely on destructive rodents such as field mice and ground squirrels, that destroy field crops. In another part of this article he suggests that a hawk may take a chicken now and then which is not the usual behavior of that group of birds, but decries the idea of killing all hawks because of it. He likens the incident to a driver of a tan-colored Ford that exceeds the speed limit and thus arresting all drivers of tan-colored Fords because of it. We know that such a thing would be stupid. Well, isn't it just as stupid to kill all hawks because of one or a few misdeeds?

The most of our birds of prey are protected by law in Iowa. This means that it is unlawful to kill the adult or molest the nests or eggs. The only individuals not protected are sharp-shinned and Cooper's hawks, and the great horned owl.

The hawks and owls play another role in the whole picture of wildlife. They are predators of mammals which in turn prey on nesting game birds. By reducing the mammal predators, the hawks and owls increase the game bird population.

We can have our cake and eat it, too. We can have our owls and hawks, and our song birds and poultry, too, in other words. Losses of poultry have been decreased by better housing. Birds and mammals you want protected can more than hold their own if you plant cover: trees, shrubs, and vines, and then provide food close at hand. Wild life areas on farms, farm ponds with surrounding trees, and bushes, wind-breaks, or shelter belts, all offer such protection and are being recognized as beneficial by the farmer.

Let's learn to know and appreciate our hawks and come to their rescue whenever we can.

Ring-necked Pheasant

Twenty-six years ago (1926) pheasant shooting began first open season, 3-1/2 days.

Quail season in 1933 - in 14 small game areas - 6 birds.

1950 - first legal season on beaver in 70 years.

Conservation Commission waiting for legislative nod to re-establish a deer season.

Harold Titus in February, 1951 Iowa Conservationist gives credit for longtime planning to Dig Darling.

First stocking in Iowa in 1906 not successful.

92 counties have open season.

115% increase in southern Iowa in 1951.

Pheasant not successful in the southern part of the state; warm weather is not conducive to hatching. Quail eggs hatch better with increased warmth.

Shooting cocks only doesn't affect the population next year because pheasants are polygamous. In several counties intensive hunting was carried on without reducing the next year's population. Male birds are surplus and belong to the hunter. He pays for the conservation program in Iowa, as all license money goes to the Commission and makes up the fund on which it operates.

75% of all pheasants are taken in the first week. Those that are left are really wiley. Survival of the fittest. When these breed they pass along their ability and we are building up a generation of super birds. No wonder it is hard to get the limit.

Many studies necessary to determine the population and set the next season's regulations for the good of the bird - and thus for the hunter.

1. During hunting season. Spur length of right legs, to get the ratio of adult to young. There were ~~ten~~ six to 6 1/2 young to every adult last year. Loss of birds: 20% without dogs, 9% with dogs. Time to bag birds: 3 hrs. 36 min. a bird, last year.
2. Fall roadside population count. Mail-carriers and conservation officers do it. Setup in 1936 by Logan Bennet and Dr. Hendrickson of Ames. 15-mile strip and back - 1 1/2 hrs. (6:30 - 8:00), 3 routes in each county. Weather watched, - not taken if wind is over 12 mph.
3. Sex ratio count in winter. Conservation officers take it. Period of six weeks. Used to show trends. Is compared with number of birds shot in year before and with crowing count taken later. One complements the other~~s~~ - get a total picture. Last year's ratio was 2.7 hens to 1 rooster. Considered 1:1 in fall.
4. Spring crowing count. Used for three years now. Begins April 1st

by Glen Sanders and Dick Nomsen (game biologists). When calls reach the peak, all other officers begin their routes. Two routes in each county, each 20 miles long, 20 stops on each. Start 45 min. before sunrise; at each stop, 2 min. count calls. Male count only: crow every 2 min. and 54 sec.

5. Nesting Study. Farmer cooperators watch for nests in hay fields and number of hens seen and killed. Hunting depends on hatching success.
6. Brood Counts. Started in 1948. Volunteers: need 500; mail-carriers cooperating. Count number of hens and number of chicks. Counts taken at same time and in same way to keep down variation. Numbers not as important as changes in numbers.

All information is sent to the Conservation Commission by the middle of August, and limits for fall hunting are set. Much work and careful study. Remember that when you would like to shoot more than you are allowed to. There is a good reason behind it.

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Quail.

Loved by American people for many reasons:
 Attractive: call, coloring, actions.
 Destroys weed seeds and insects
 Provides good sport
 Good to eat
 Used in field trials for dogs.

Bevy together.

Camouflaged: disappear in front of your eyes. Startle you when they fly up.

Open season in 51 counties. Jefferson County has a long quail season, - Nov. 1st to Dec. 15th, 8:30 - 4:30; six birds.

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Woodpecker.

The Hairy Woodpecker is one of several woodpeckers who spend the winter with us. We have hairy, downy, red-headed, red-bellied, and for part of the winter, the flicker. The hairy woodpecker is not as common as the downy: woods. Bill much longer - $9\frac{1}{2}$ " - downy, $6\frac{1}{2}$ ". Of value in orchards: food is $\frac{3}{4}$ animal matter. Wood-boring larvae obtained all year through. The male has a red patch.

Generalities: strong bills; spines on tail feathers; two toes front and two back; tongue long and extends far back in head, barbed on end; less migratory than many birds, some food all year: wood-boring grubs, hibernating insects, eggs and pupae. Rarely peck in healthy tree, - they are after insects in dead wood. Cavities aid other nesting birds. Galloping, wavy flight like goldfinches.

Downy woodpecker: He is not downy, and the hairy woodpecker is not hairy! Drumming on a tree is his love call. Spends winter in hole in tree. Fruit-growers' friend: flat-headed apple-tree borer, codling moth. Never common, but more so than the hairy woodpecker.

Red-headed woodpecker: 9". Striking coloring. Much criticized - corn, fruit, eggs and young of other birds - well founded. Local. More good than harm. Noisy - quee-o-quee-o-queer. Spotty distribution.

Red-bellied or Zebra woodpecker: $9\frac{1}{2}$ ". Red on top of head only. Chad bird from loud brassy call. Down in ravine - in hole in tree.

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Here the year around.

State bird in 1933.

Food habits almost entirely beneficial. Weed seeds, such as thistle, sunflower, ragweed, and wild lettuce are all delicacies.

Beauty of the bird this summer as he sat on thistle pulling out seeds one by one, eating part and dropping part. Ten minutes, still there.

Song is cheerful and musical. Sweet, sweet, cheewitchewit - cheewit.

Uneven bouncing flight - twittering on the downward swing.

Wild canary, yellow bird, thistle bird, lettuce bird.

More, the merrier, small flocks throughout the year. Ten in February in buckbrush and osage orange, etc. in Lamson's pasture. Characteristic flight, white wing bars.

Come more readily to natural food grown for them. Leave sunflower heads on stalks. Much sunflower eaten when brought in.

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WINTER RESIDENTS

Eastern Tree Sparrow. Comes in autumn. Identification marks: russet crown, breast spot. Weed seed eater: probably no equal. Professor Beale of Biological Survey estimates it consumes over 800 tons of weedseed each season in the state of Iowa along. Likes thickets at edge of woods. Trip with Bill in Tiffin - late afternoon - cloudy.

Junco (Slate-colored). Snowbird. Seed-eater in fields, fence rows, woodland borders. Large numbers - wide distribution. Much good done. Will feed on ground under feeder. Friend put out toast tied to a tree; ate crumbs on snow but never fed in bush. Identification: sooty back, head; white bill against dark feathers - two white outer tail feathers. Travel in flocks.

Hoyt's Horned Lark. Open country. Joyous tinkling call on wing. The horned lark is widely distributed; there are 21 varieties of one species. Size, bluebird; throat, white or yellow; black mark across breast; pointed tufts of black feathers behind eyes. Flight, straight up, back where he started. walk. long hind claws. bare fields. real friend of farmer.

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MIGRANTS.

Brown Creeper. Always works up a tree, never down. Nondescript plumage and call. Not harmful and not beneficial.

Ruffed Grouse. Can be increased. Small woods and thickets where food is suitable. Winter food: rose hips, grapes, sumacs, old apples, sunflowers, buds of birch, poplar, willow, laurel.

Wild Sapsucker. Red and yellow under chin; damage to trees; loud in spring; fermented sap; most migratory of all woodpeckers; mistaken for downy - too bad.

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RESIDENTS.

Wild Turkeys. Iowa County - Amana. Difficult to approach.

Prairie Chicken. Appanoose County. Loss of food and cover (cats, dogs, rats), grasses, rose, sunflower. Booming March until May.

Cedar Waxwings. Migrant and summer resident. Beautiful delicate coloring. nest here. Not dependable - restless - on move. Gregarious in flocks.

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Ted Pettit: Birds in Your Back Yard. The number of different birds seen in the yard is in direct proportion to the number of hours spent watching. The more time spent, the more birds you see. You cannot always rely on interesting birds to arrive on Saturday or Sunday. Some of them may prefer week-days. (Trouble while shaving.)

"Go outdoors to enjoy yurself, and if an unknown bird happens along, study him intently, and when you return to the house, look him up in a bird book. The next time you see him outdoors, you will know him. That's all there is to it, and gradually your list of well-known birds will grow. There is no possibility of learning ornithology in six easy lessons. It takes continued interest and time. And no one knows it all!" Menaboni's Birds, p. 39.

It is fun to know the birds.

There is relaxation in getting out in the open.

Let's get out and visit our feathered friends who are here with us.

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Written by Margaret Herdliska for
presentation to the Fairfield Bird Club,
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