



Bird Notes

From Northeast Kingdom Audubon
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For Immediate Release

AWAITING THE SEASONAL SURPRISES

Just after updating my bird count for The Great Backyard Bird Count, I realized that it is definitely not too early to watch for the birds of the season ahead. This winter's strange weather patterns have in fact enabled some typical non-resident birds to stay around feeding stations and shrubrows. It is no surprise that the most abundant and ever popular Black-capped Chickadee has topped the count lists in Vermont and New Hampshire this year. The usual feeder suspects, Mourning Doves, Blue Jays, nuthatches and woodpeckers have been joined by a good invasion of finches, grosbeaks and waxwings along with large flocks of Snow Buntings, making this winter's birdwatching definitely worth the while. The more-than-usual open water on our lakes and ponds, may have kept the ice shanties and their inhabitants on shore, but has given us more opportunities to view a nice variety of ducks and gulls. An unusual Tufted Duck was seen recently on Lake Champlain.

But some people are reporting birds usually seen during the breeding season, like a Carolina Wren, Yellow-rumped Warbler, or a Song Sparrow and a White-throated Sparrow as well. Over 100 American Robins were counted in New Hampshire. Bluebirds still here in February? Where is the spring surprise there? Together with the warmer temperatures, well-stocked feeders or unfrozen berries, fruits and hips could help explain these reports. Cooper's or Sharp-shinned Hawks can be expected, but American Kestrels?

Even before the equinox gives us 12 hours of daylight, the first to return will find our feeders and fields. While you are still watching the resident birds we have become so used to, don't be surprised to see male Red-winged Blackbirds with European Starlings, Brown-headed Cowbirds and Common Grackles by the end of March. Farms with open pits and fields with old corn, and wetlands with standing dead cattails are the destinations for the first flocks. But what of the Turkey Vulture, considered the true spring harbinger, first noted on Feb 15th in Brattleboro? Will there be enough carrion for it this time of year? Probably. Will our occasional later winter surprise blizzard take its toll on the early ones? Probably not. National Audubon has reported that birds overwintering unexpectedly could actually be better adapted to winter survival. Smarter? If they can find food and protection from cold and predators, they can make it through. Amazingly some do.

And when they do, they are being watched! Someone, somewhere is looking out the window, driving back roads, walking along trails, hoping to be surprised. The delight of discovering something early, something late, something from far away, anything unusual, seems to correspond with an equally strong desire in some people, to share the experience. Fortunately today, technology provides the means to do just that. Anyone can send out information, virtually

just as soon as they have it. Using the Internet, you can find out what people have been seeing anywhere in North America and Quebec on the Rare Bird Alert weekly reports at <http://www.virtualbirder.com/vbirder/realbirds/rbas/VT.html>. Another way to find the birds that have been seen in your state or county, is as easy as going to <http://www.ebird.org/content/index.html>. Then, if you stricken with the urge to share what you just saw out your windows or through your binoculars, there is VT BIRD, <http://www.uvm.edu/~ebuford/vtbird.html>, an email list for discussion of wild birds and birding in Vermont and adjacent areas. Birders or just nature enthusiasts can report recent sightings, ask questions, announce field trips, or discuss bird conservation issues. How do you think I knew about the Turkey Vulture in Brattleboro?

Some people will be waiting for the season's newcomers to show up in the yard or on the feeders, and some people wait for the email bell to go off on the computer to find out what has been reported somewhere. I do both. And now you have some tools to find out about and share your spring surprises.

Happy birding!