

Winter birds in the Big Sky

Gary Swant teaches how to attract birds in winter by providing a proper habitat

As a small acreage landowner, and an avid birder, I know first hand that winter days can be filled with enjoyment watching birds on your own property. I have found 96 species, with 46 seen during winter months, on my land. Montana has 424 bird species. 156 species overwinter in Montana, while another 44 that don't normally overwinter have been seen during winter months. With that said, you can easily attract nearly 50 species of birds in the winter with a proper habitat.

BIRDS IN MONTANA DURING WINTER MONTHS

There are 36 species of waterfowl, including five non-breeding winter residents. Those winter residents include the greater white-fronted goose, snow goose, tundra swan, three species of scoter, and the long-tailed duck.

There are 13 birds of prey that are winter residents. All breed here except for the tundra breeding rough-legged hawk. Most rough-legs you will encounter in Montana are females; juveniles and males migrate farther south.

The flammulated owl is the only non-winter resident of Montana's 15 owls. Snowy owls are a winter resident that breed

in the arctic are an irruptive species (migrate into an area in abnormally large numbers) and are only recorded in large numbers every two to five years, depending on the abundance of small rodents — their winter food source in Canada. The northern shrike is a common non-breeding winter resident that survives on smaller perching birds, mice, shrews and voles.

Sparrows are represented by 16 species with five nonbreeding winter residents. The lapland longspur and snow bunting can, at times, be found in large flocks. Common and hoary redpolls are also an irruptive species in Montana whereas in our annual local Christmas Bird Count there were none recorded in 2000. In 2001, there were 869 redpolls recorded. However, again in 2002, there were no redpolls recorded.

All perching birds, or passerines, are song birds. There are nearly 200 song birds found in Montana, of which 97 have been seen in the winter and 71 are documented winter residents. Birds have what are called songs and calls. Songs are used to establish and protect territories as well as attract breeding females. Females often select mates by the quality of their songs. In general, song quality is an indicator of the male's stamina and fertility. Unfortunately, these beautiful songs are only used in the spring and





Top: Common Redpoll - A non-breeding winter irruptive species.

Bottom: Rough-legged Hawk on fence post near a rib-cage placed in a field.

summer. Calls are used for alarms, and social interactions. They can be heard year around. Feeding areas can be very noisy with calls, especially if you have finches, siskins, and chickadees. Listen for alarm calls when shrikes, owls or raptors enter your yard or fly overhead.

Even in the winter you can witness some oddities of birds that have been seen rarely in Montana. This can be a real treat. For instance, a vermilion flycatcher, a spectacular red species of southern Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas was recorded a number of years ago at the Lee Metcalf Wildlife Refuge. It was also reported that it became a meal for a northern shrike, another non-breeding winter resident. I'm sure his brilliant vermilion red color showed like a beacon in our white Montana winter environment.

INCREASE OPPORTUNITIES FOR WINTER BIRDS

Starting with a good field guide, identify and make a list of the birds you see. I suggest either the Sibley Guide to Birds, or the Field Guide to the Birds of North America. If you record what you see every day, you will soon see patterns in dates for first arrivals and departures. You will also learn what birds use your yard and what they feed on.

Attracting winter birds is about having a proper habitat, supplemented with bird feeders and water. In order to attract winter birds, you have to provide a natural setting with shelter, food, and water. Planting native trees and shrubs that survive Montana's harsh winters is best. Select species that provide cover as well as food such as black hawthorn, chokecherry, serviceberry, dogwood, juniper, golden current, Oregon grape, and silver buffaloberry. All of these shrubs provide cover and a winter berry source. A brush pile, in addition to common juniper, provides cover and roost areas. I have watched sharp-shinned hawks and merlin's sitting on a brush pile trying to get an American tree sparrow or house sparrows buried safely in the pile.

To supplement the plants on your property, I suggest constructing a 12' x 12' L-shaped fence. This will help shield the small bird garden. Because the winters are harsh in our valley which sits at 4,600 feet in elevation, this natural wood fence produces a microclimate that protects plants from north winds and maximizes the southern sun. Trees and shrubs have flourished with this extra protection.

Top: Chuck Carlson; Bottom: Gary Swant; Background: Katie Hatfield





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You also need to add some bird feeders. We usually provide black sunflower and thistle seed and avoid millet or millet/sunflower mixes, as they tend to attract mostly house sparrows, doves and pigeons. We use wire-screened feeders that allow finches, chickadees and other small perching birds

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access, but discourage large birds such as blackbirds. Ground feeders such as doves and sparrows will still get seed, which falls out of the feeders to the ground. We also incorporate platform feeders close to the ground to attract several species of native sparrows.

Seed feeders are placed where the birds can fly from protective cover to feeders and back to cover again. Suet blocks are another option for feeding birds in winter and can attract woodpeckers, flickers and chickadees.

In the winter, as in the summer, water is a necessity for birds. However, you don't want to heat the water in the winter to keep it from freezing – the birds will avoid it. Fresh daily water will remain unfrozen for several hours, especially if placed in dark shallow pans that collect solar radiation, even in the coldest weather.

Beyond our bird garden, we provide nesting and cover habitat with Engelmann

spruce, pine trees of several varieties, choke-cherry and caragana windrows and hedges. Leaving some pasture grass that hasn't been grazed or mowed will increase the opportunity for cover for pheasants, partridge, and native sparrows. Do not burn or haul away cleared brush or tree limbs. Instead, make a large brush pile for birds in a backfield for additional cover and roosting spots. If you do mow or graze fields, be generous with the amount of grass you leave along fences. Placing deer and elk rib cages in your backfield will provide food for raptors. By incorporating some of these things, you can have wonderful views of even bald and golden eagles from your window.

If you have a pond or creek, protect the riparian zone by eliminating grazing near those areas. Most willow species will respond with rapid growth along waterways if they are not grazed. Healthy riparian zones provide nesting habitat, food, and shelter. Consider making narrow rows of grain near ponds to attract waterfowl. A row the width of a garden tiller and 30 feet long, planted with grain, will add many additional species to your land.

If you provide good habitat, supplemented with sunflower and thistle seed, and water when necessary, birds will come. Many folks talk of winter blues. I can't think of a better way to rid the blues than watching winter birds interacting with each other and you. ■

Gary Swant was a biology and field ecology teacher for 25 years in the Upper Clark Fork River drainage before starting GoBirdMontana (www.gobirdmontana.org) in 2009. This story originally appeared in Big Sky Small Acres magazine, Winter 2009.