Backyard Birds Open a Window on Science

ACROSS THE CONTINENT, PROJECT FEEDERWATCH CELEBRATES A QUARTER-CENTURY OF FEEDING CURIOSITY

tend the reach of science. More than 15,000 of the winter's first siskin, redpoll, crossbill, people do that each year as part of Project or nuthatch. FeederWatch, which begins its 25th year on science project.

handle on sudden population changes, like

If you're already a FeederWatcher, thank the seemingly unstoppable expansion of the vou for helping us understand winter birds Eurasian Collared-Dove or, more worryingly, better. To the millions of others who keep the unexplained decline of the magnificent feeders, we extend a warm invitation to join Evening Grosbeak.

Variations on a Theme

If you've got a feeder, you've probably got

a chickadee. But which one? Feeder birds

are a celebration of diversity and unity.

bluebirds, towhees, and chickadees.

oining a continent in shades of jays.

f you keep bird feeders, you're keep- privy to many memorable sightings, from ing an eye on the natural world-and misguided European finches turning up in vou can use what you see to help ex- North America to the perennial anticipation

FeederWatch takes the memories and November 12. The combined data all those highlights at your own feeder and, by com-FeederWatchers have sent in-on just over bining them with thousands of others, finds 100 million individual birds so far-have extra meaning in them. To date, nearly two made it a resoundingly successful citizen- dozen peer-reviewed scientific publications have drawn on Project FeederWatch data to The data have helped scientists under- explore subjects including seed choice, disstand the rhythms of bird irruptions, trace ease dynamics, predation by cats and hawks, the course of emerging diseases, and get a and the emerging effects of climate change.

the project and take part in what has become Over the years, FeederWatchers have been an annual pleasure for many participants.

Presenting the All-Time #1 Feeder Bird

Year

At feeders all over the continent, one bird towers above all others, at least in terms of occurrence. The Dark-eyed Junco visits more than 80 percent of all FeederWatchers in any given year. In any of its forms (the 'slate-colored" and "Oregon" are the most widespread), this plucky little snowbird is the perennial feeder champion

What's in the FeederWatch Kit?

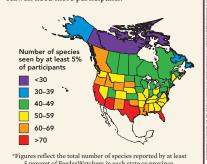
Project FeederWatch is a winter-long survey, and anyone can do it: children, families, teachers and students, retirees, coworkers on lunch breaks, nature centers, and more. Participants count birds at their feeders from November to early April on two consecutive days as often as once a week, then send us their data. Join up and we'll send you a kit with everything you need:

- · Handbook and instructions with tips for attracting birds to your yard.
- FeederWatch calendar for planning count days, illustrated with participants' photos.
- · "Common Feeder Birds" poster with more than 30 illustrations by field-guide artist Larry McQueen, including many of those on this page.
- Access to the FeederWatch forums, where participants share. discuss, and exchange help.

A small annual fee, about the price of half a bag of sunflower seed, provides essential support for staff time, website maintenance, data analysis, and materials

How Many Birds Could You See?

The more you look at your feeders, the more species vou'll see. Though northern winters are quiet. several dozen species are still the norm at many feeders Farther south winter can mean neak birding-Arizona reports 85 species on its Feeder-Watch list.* No matter where you are, we need your data to help fill in trends in occurrence and distribution. In particular, the states of Nevada and Hawaii need more participants.



Learn more: www.feederwatch.org

Seed Preference Tests

In 1993 a study finally put hard numbers to the question of what kinds of seed hirds like FeederWatchers sent data from 5,000 locations, helping our researchers discover that whereas black oil sunflower seed is beloved among tree-living birds such as chickadees and finches, ground-foragers such as Mourning Doves and many sparrows are more fond of millet. Even red milo has its place, edging out sunflower and millet in the choices of Gambel's Quail, Curve-billed Thrasher, and

Predation at Your Feeders

A 1994 study found that predators probably do

not kill any more birds at feeders than else-

where. The most common predators at

feeders were Sharp-shinned and Coo-

per's hawks, closely followed by do-

mestic cats. Window strikes out-

paced deaths from predation,

nighlighting the importance

of good feeder placement.

Top Movers

In the last 25 years, a few birds have dramatically expanded their ranges. Redbellied Woodpeckers and Carolina Wrens have pushed northward and now regularly spend winters in New England, possibly because of changing climate or the growing popularity of birdfeeding.

The Dove No One Saw Coming

One of the most common birds at feeders today-the Eurasian Collared-Dove-wasn't even in your field guide when FeederWatch started. In the early 90s it was a curiosity mostly restricted to south Florida. Since then it has rocketed across the continent, appearing everywhere except the Northeast, Last year, a FeederWatcher even recorded one in Alaska.

counting common birds-or even no birds-is every bit as important. Robins aren't just birds of spring. We think

You'll Likely See More Than You Expect A host of common birds come to feeders (see map, above, for the number of species that visit feeders in your area). Each year FeederWatchers find the unexpected too, from escaped parrots to national rarities.

in the north. You could see them at any time. Feeding birds won't delay their migration. The main trigger for a bird's migratory urge is day length. When it's time to go, your feeders won't keep birds from leaving-but they might give them the energy to go.

Ho-hum days are important data. "Predict-

able" counts are at the heart of FeederWatch

data-it's exciting to report a rare bird, but

of robins as a sign of spring, but many gather

into large, nomadic flocks in winter, even far

Busting the Top Five Myths

About FeederWatch

Birds don't get addicted to feeders. Birds may visit your feeder every day, but they actually get most of their food from natural sources.

You are allowed to take your eyes off your feeder. Lots of people travel for the holidays. If you'll be gone for part of the winter, you can still collect valuable data during the time that you're home.

Monitoring Disease

FeederWatchers have been indispensable at discovering and tracking bird diseases. In 1994 they discovered House Finch eye disease, which cut the eastern North American population of House Finches in half as it spread across the continent. FeederWatchers helped track West Nile virus as it spread, too, and in 2002 their data helped estimate the disease's heavy toll on crows and jays. Since then, FeederWatchers have been equally crucial in recording population recoveries.

Evening Grosbeak Declines

Birds move over vast areas, making population changes impossible to detect from isolated counts. Widespread, long-term records like those of Project FeederWatch are essential for distinguishing normal population fluctuations from true declines. FeederWatchers' data have helped researchers document this spectacular bird's decline-a 50 percent drop in the number of locations hosting this species over 20 years—giving us a handle on

Timelines: A Quarter-Century of Perspective There's only one way to discover a long-term trend, and that's to collect data for a long time. Below, three species illustrate three

kinds of population trends revealed by Project FeederWatch data

Getting Help with Similar Species

site, with more than 60,000 views per year.

Soon after FeederWatch began, people started asking us for help with tough identifications. So we started a

Tricky Bird IDs webpage to help people with Downy and

Hairy woodpeckers, House, Purple, and Cassin's finches,

and other easily confused species. It was a hit-our accipiter

page alone is the third-most-visited page on the FeederWatch

Lines show the percentage of FeederWatchers reporting each species, a measure

■ RED: Common Redpolls, like many seed-eating finches, are irruptive species every couple of years they range widely in response to changes in food supplies. FeederWatchers help map these irruptions across the continent.

YELLOW: In the 1990s, Evening Grosbeaks showed an irruptive pattern similar to Common Redpolls, but by the 2000s overall counts were much lower, with less year-to-year fluctuation.

The Cornell Lab of Ornithology



the best seed on your block? FeederWatch data are great for delineating such patterns. Studies published in 1996 and 1999 clarified irruption cycles in Varied Thrushes and winter finches.

Part of feeding birds is guessing what will show up each year. Irruptions-large-scale movements that don't happen every year-are hard to pin down. Are high counts part of a major invasion-or do you just happen to have

Understanding Irruptions

PFW checklist No 1.000,000

2010