

*ultimate guide to*

# watching birds

SPECIAL SECTION

YEAR-ROUND BIRD GUIDE

Get great tips for watching birds, no matter what time of year it is.

By David Shaw

Seasonality is a strange thing. Those of us who live far from the equator integrate the seasons into our lives quite naturally. We are always aware of the change of the seasons—the shifts in light and temperature, the changes in the trees, flowers and crops in our gardens. For birders, these changes are even more dramatic, as each season brings its regular species, highlights and, yes, even periods of the doldrums.

Birds adjust not only their plumage, behavior and food based on the seasons, but they also make mind-bending migrations across continents and oceans in response to them. These movements and behaviors add a dimension to the year-round changes for those of us who watch birds. Each season brings something new, something different, something that demands that we sit up and pay attention.

## Waiting to be Surprised

Winter can seem dark, cold and lifeless. Those of us who live in the northern part of the country (very far north in my case of Fairbanks, Alaska) are accustomed to snow, frigid temperatures and a landscape that can seem void of any living thing. From a birding perspective it can be monotonous. Common feeder birds flit in and out, the same few species, day in and day out. We long for the days of spring and summer.

But then, during one of our periodic glances out the window, something different appears. A pine grosbeak, perhaps, a northern shrike or a red-breasted nuthatch. The new bird flies into the branches, scattering a flurry of snow as it lands. The colors and patterns of the new arrival help us forget about the cold, the dark and the monochromatic landscape. We

Red-breasted nuthatch

RICHARD ORY / SHUTTERSTOCK

become entranced by the bird at hand.

This is winter birding for me in the interior of Alaska, but a similar story can be told virtually anywhere. In western Washington state, where I attended college, winter was one of the finest times of year for birding as species from across the North congregated in the wetlands and estuaries. And although there was far more diversity in those wet coastal forests than here in Alaska, one trait remained constant: Things often seemed the same, day after day.

Rain there, snow here. The species were usually the same, though there were far more of them. But the rarities and the surprises served to remind me that despite the apparent monotony, things were not always the same after all.

### Try to Keep Up

The pleasures of watching birds really come to light during the changes of the seasons. Wherever you live in North America, the appearance of the first migrants is a cause for celebration. It is a sign that winter has lost its grip and the warmth of spring is not far away.

Every spring day is a bit like Christmas because there is bound to be a new gift waiting, if one is willing to look for it. In the South, the first signs of spring may not be the arrival of a new species but the sudden absence of the winter residents. Meanwhile, farther north we wait for the arrival

of those same species: snow buntings, juncos, longspurs or robins. Spring is a fleeting time of sudden and constant change. It forces our attention, incites the desire to step outside, to listen and to watch.

Spring is also a time of sudden and ephemeral abundance. Weather patterns and migration occasionally coincide to create what are known as "fall-outs." Like construction on an interstate, bad weather can create a traffic jam of sorts along the migration route. Countless birds can be caught up behind the storms, waiting for their chance to move north once again. This phenomenon is particularly dramatic along the Gulf of Mexico and the Great Lakes, where flocks of migrants sometimes descend from the sky, decorating the shrubs and trees like colorful, living ornaments.

Migration, of course, is not always so dramatic. Often it is as simple as backyards, recently silent, newly filled with the sounds of birds. Not all species arrive at the same time. The sparrows are often first, heralding the arrival of others. Birds arrive one species after another until the last wave of wings has flowed north up the continent.

**WEATHER PATTERNS.** Weather plays a large role in bird activity. If a storm comes through, it can affect birds for thousands of miles. Below, American robins often travel together in winter because it's easier to find food. At right is a robin's nest hidden among spring azalea blooms and an eastern phoebe in summer.



### Flurry of Activity

When the blasts of heat arrive with summer, the birds change their tunes. They, like us, settle into a routine. Summer, so different from winter in many respects, surprisingly bears some similarities.

It can be a time of apparent stagnation. But, unlike the cold months, it is the stagnation of a tropical lake. Still, yes, but filled with expanding life as nests are constructed, eggs laid and hatched, nestlings fed and eventually fledged. The species may not change all that much, but the birds are boisterous and multiplying.

The mottled browns and streaky plumage of the first juvenile sparrows challenge the identification skills of the most astute birder. Then as observers get a grasp on the sparrows, fledgling warblers and flycatchers appear, and the challenge begins anew. Confusing us more, adult birds look worn and tattered, like the tired parents they are, and seem to sulk in the brush, exhausted. For a few weeks in July and August the trees are again filled, as fledglings disperse and adults start to fuel up for the molt into their winter plumage and the migration to follow.

One day in September a species or two goes missing. Like a partygoer who attends out of politeness or obligation, the last species to arrive is often the first to leave. Here in Alaska, the alder flycatcher, a species that spends only around 6 weeks on the breeding grounds, is the first to flee the North and start its journey to the far southern portion of South America. Soon another species follows, then another and another.

By early September, in my neck of the woods, there is a veritable flurry of fluttering wings as one after another the migrants pick up and fly south, the first tendrils of winter brushing their retreating tails. As winter again grabs control of the landscape, left behind is a small cluster of resident birds breathing a sigh of relief as they reclaim the forests, fields and backyard feeders as their own. ◀



David Shaw lives in Fairbanks, Alaska. His father almost ran a rental RV into a ditch so Dave could see his first peregrine falcon. Dave has been grateful to him ever since.