

I'm a dedicated FeederWatcher. Each winter, I hang up my feeders and eagerly await the arrival of birds to count. Will all of the usual suspects show up? Will I have any new visitors this season?

Over the course of the winter, I track chickadees, titmice, and nuthatches; juncos, towhees, and crowned sparrows. I record surges and dips in finch numbers. Jays stop by, doves forage, and occasionally a woodpecker shows up to sample suet. One year, siskins passed through (very exciting!). A Townsend's Warbler, a petite and colorful masked bandit of a bird, was a daily visitor for months last winter. I report these sightings to *FeederWatch*—and love every minute I spend with the birds.

If you're a backyard birdwatcher—or just intrigued by the idea of getting to know your local birds—you can join *FeederWatch* this winter and help out the birds.

What is FeederWatch?

Project FeederWatch is a citizen science project about the birds that you see in winter. Every year during the colder months, FeederWatchers across the U.S. and Canada count the birds they see outside their windows and report their counts to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. Data from *FeederWatch* are used by scientists to better understand where some of our most common bird species are—and aren't—found, and how that's changing over time.

While many FeederWatchers have bird feeders, you don't need them to participate—you can simply count the birds that you see in your yard or from your window. Pick a count location that works for you—at home, at work, at school, any area you can regularly watch during the winter. Once you choose your site, you'll do all your counts there.

The schedule and duration of each count are up to you. You can record data weekly if you want to, or do only a few counts throughout the season. In fact, if you count only two or three times during the winter, for as little as fifteen minutes per count, the data you collect are still useful to science.

This winter, *FeederWatch* started in mid-November and ends in April. You can join *FeederWatch* at any time during the season—joining now still gives you plenty of time to watch birds and contribute data.



Oak Titmouse
Hita Bambhaniya-Modha

Why feed birds in winter?

I recently interviewed Dr. Emma Greig, the U.S. Project Leader for *FeederWatch* at the Cornell Lab, about the benefits of bird feeding and what we've learned from *FeederWatch*.

"One of the biggest questions that always comes up is what is the impact of supplementary feeding on birds," Greig says. The answer? "Winter bird feeding can keep birds alive," she says. When temperatures drop in winter, food is less plentiful, and studies have shown that bird feeders can increase birds' chances of survival.

In addition, a recent study from Sweden shows that feeders can be especially helpful to female birds, which are subordinate to males when it comes to access to food. Females that get extra food in winter don't drop their body temperatures as much at night as those that don't get supplemental food, and their survival rate improves.

How does FeederWatch help?

Information collected by FeederWatchers helps scientists understand trends in North American bird populations. About 30 scientific papers have come from study of the data, with findings about invasive species, irruptive movements, climate, and habitat use.

A major theme of the research findings is that there is a connection between climate and where birds are and

aren't found. For example, as places get warmer, more warm-adapted species are being reported in these locations. Range expansions and contractions are occurring, and this trend is visible in our yards. Climate change is "really having an impact on the creatures around us," says Greig.

FeederWatch data have led to a fascinating discovery about Anna's Hummingbirds on the West Coast: the birds have been extending their range northward, and this expansion is linked to feeders. Anna's can now be found all the way up to Alaska, and the further north you go, the more the bird is associated with people. There are fewer Anna's overall in northern regions—but northern FeederWatchers that report seeing them also see the birds more often than FeederWatchers further south.

The frequency with which Anna's Hummingbirds are reported in the north suggests that the birds are using feeders more regularly there to make it through the winter. The data also show that human behavior has changed, and that people in the north are putting out more hummingbird feeders. "Hummingbirds and people are both changing," says Greig, and we can't separate cause from effect.

These discoveries show the "value of repeated observations from the same place," Greig says. "You can't get this kind of storytelling from just a single count."

Future directions

Greig hopes that more people will participate in *FeederWatch*, regardless of whether they have feeders. In fact, it would be valuable to have data from people who don't have feeders in their yards, or from those who don't have yards. "All you

really need is a space that you can look at," says Greig, like a garden, or the courtyard of an apartment complex. "Maybe all you ever see are pigeons and house sparrows—that's okay, we want to understand that that's where those birds are. That's extremely useful data."

Why join FeederWatch?

Participation in *FeederWatch* has benefits in addition to helping science.

If you are new to birdwatching, *FeederWatch* is a fun way to learn about some of the common birds you see each day. Don't worry about bird identification—there are plenty of resources to help you (see our list below). There also aren't a lot of birds that you'll need to know—in my experience, there are about a dozen usual species in most yards. "Just do the best you can," says Greig, and don't let it stress you.

For new and experienced birders alike, *FeederWatch* is an enjoyable way to hone your observation skills and get to know some of your closest neighbors—the birds that are right outside your window—even better. Just by watching, you'll discover birds' foraging strategies, their pecking order (pun intended!), and other typical behaviors.

Finally, by giving birds your close attention, you "can't help but feel more connected and aware of nature," says Greig. This connection is good for your well-being, and bodes well for the rest of the natural world too. "The more people are connected with nature, maybe the more thoughtful they are about the decisions they make" that affect the environment, Greig says. "That connection is valuable to nature and to the world." ●



White-breasted Nuthatch
Brooke Miller

BACKYARD RESOURCES

Join FeederWatch

www.feederwatch.org

Our Website

Backyard Bird of the Month, Notes & Tips from a Backyard Birder, and more on common yard birds in our county
www.scvas.org/backyard-birding

Our Nature Shop

For a selection of bird feeders & bird food

Have Questions? backyardbirds@scvas.org