



Wild About Birds

Backyard birdfeeding experts!

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BirdChat Spring Newsletter

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Bird Biology: Ecological Niches, Part 3

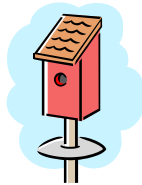
Every part of the earth, except the polar icecaps, is inhabited by two or more bird species living and interacting in the same area. The roles that different species play in that area define their ecological niche.

Different species cannot “completely and simultaneously” occupy the same niche or one will eventually become extinct. In the Fall 2009 (October) issue of *BirdChat* we discussed the varied foraging habits of diverse species. In this issue, we will explore differences in reproductive habits that allow birds of distinct species to coexist in your backyard.

The reproductive cycle of birds, like most living organisms, ensures that the young are cared for so they can

reach the age of independence and eventually pass on the parents genes.

Birds must establish a safe nesting site. There is much variety in the way the different species build their nests. For example, bluebirds, chickadees, wrens, and woodpeckers use cavities for nesting. Robins, doves and cardinals often build their nests in shrubs. Killdeer lay their well camouflaged eggs right on your gravel driveway. Chimney swift nests cling to the interior walls of your chimney and orioles’ intricately woven nests hang from branches in tall trees.



The timing of the nesting cycle usually depends on the availability of food for the

nestlings. Many raptors, like owls and hawks, begin nesting during winter months because larger young take longer to develop and the time of their peak feeding demand coincides with the availability of easy prey—baby mammals and birds! Most songbirds nest in late spring when insects are abundant. Goldfinches, however, nest a month or two later because they feed seeds to their young and seeds generally aren’t available until late summer.

When nesting gets underway this spring, consider the diversity of the species and how their differences ensure their survival in your backyard.

Reference: Cornell Lab of Ornithology’s *Home Study Course in Bird Biology*, Second Edition

In this issue:

Bird Biology: Ecological Niches, Part 3

What You Might Not Know About Hummingbirds

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Nature’s Bug Zappers



“...differences in reproductive habits allow birds of distinct species to coexist in your backyard.”



What You Might Not Know About Hummingbirds

- Found only in the western hemisphere
- Fly about 30 mph
- Diet is 75% nectar, 25% insects/spiders
- Wings beat about 70-80 times per second
- Depending on air temperatures, hummingbirds must eat every 5-60 minutes
- Weight equals about 2½ paper clips
- At rest, their hearts beat 500 times a minute (8 beats

- per second)
- Visit from 1,000 to 3,000 flowers a day for nectar
- Do not have a very good sense of smell, are attracted to flowers’ colors, not scents like insects are
- Nectar recipe closest chemically to real nectar is: 4 parts water to 1 part table sugar
- Never use food color, honey, cherry juice, Kool-aid, 7UP, artificial sweeteners, etc.
- Feeders with very few parts

- and those that are easy to take apart are best
- Glass bottles are easiest to clean
- Nectar must be changed and feeder should be cleaned at least two times per week
- Try to avoid yellow as it attracts bees
- Some part of feeder should be red to attract hummingbirds



“Wings beat about 70-80 times per second.”

Spring Has Sprung!

Spring is here and the signs of a fresh, new season are in your own backyard.

The most obvious harbingers of spring are the American goldfinches. As early as late February you began to see splotches of bright yellow as the goldfinches molt into their breeding plumage. Most of our backyard birds go through a spring molt, but none change as dramatically as the male goldfinch!

Feeder activity may appear to have dwindled as winter flocks break up into mated pairs and start establishing breeding territory. Searching for nesting sites is occupying more of their time. But soon the numbers will increase as migrants pass through and stop for a visit.

Most of our winter visitors—white-throated sparrows, juncos, yellow-bellied sapsuckers, red-breasted nuthatches, pine siskin, purple finches—have left. The males usually leave first in order to stake a claim on good nesting sites in their northern, summer breeding territory. But as our winter visitors leave we will soon be welcoming those spring migrants like fox sparrows and rose-breasted grosbeaks as they pass through. Then our summer visitors will arrive – ruby-throated hummingbirds, orioles, and warblers.

Not only can you see the signs of spring, but you can hear them, too. Did you notice how quiet it was outside during the winter? I'm sure you've "heard" a big difference in recent weeks!

The birds are starting to sing again and someone's pecking away on those downspouts. Courtship behavior is a sure sign of the change of season. Male birds sing to declare their territory and to attract a mate. Blue jays make the most racket as they call back and forth while chasing a female into the tops of the trees. Those woodpeckers accomplish the same thing by drumming on your gutters and chimney flashing – the loudest one is the winner! As spring goes on, the chorus will get louder and louder. In mid-summer the raising of young will become more important than singing and the noise level will diminish.

Keep an eye (and an ear) open. You won't want to miss a single sign in your backyard that spring has arrived right on schedule!



"...birds are starting to sing again..."

Nature's Bug-Zappers

Bats are very beneficial mammals, generally quite harmless to people. In the past, old wives' tales about bats being rabid and getting tangled in one's hair instilled unnecessary fear in many people. Today, bats are recognized as valuable to mankind in the ecosystem.

Bats pollinate some night blooming plants and are responsible for more than 80% of tropical rainforest reforestation through seed dispersal. In North America, our interest is in their huge, nightly insect consuming capacity—up to 600 gnat-sized insects an

hour. Bats are the major predator of night-flying insects. One lone little brown bat, the most abundant species in our area, can eat 3,000 -7,000 mosquitoes each night. That's a lot more environmentally friendly than an electric bug-zapper or insecticide; both will kill more than just harmful insects!

Most bats cannot survive subfreezing temperatures; in the fall they migrate south to hibernate in caves.

You can attract bats to your yard during the spring and summer months by hanging bat houses 10-15' above the ground, sheltered from

the wind on the side of a building or tree that receives maximum sun. Be patient though; it may take a couple years for bats to occupy the box. Adding a pond to your backyard habitat will attract many species of wildlife including insects. After bats emerge from their roosts in the evening, they will hunt for insects above the surface of the water all night.

Bat populations are declining all over the world due to human misunderstanding and habitat loss. Do your part; invite nature's bug-zapper into your yard.



"...insect consuming capacity—up to 600 gnat-sized insects an hour."

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