



# Wild About Birds

Backyard birdfeeding experts!

1133 Main Street  
Milford, OH 45150  
513-248-2044  
www.birdchat.com

## BirdChat: Winter 2012

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### Turning Your Backyard into Wild Bird Habitat: What Birds Tell Us About Our Environment

**B**ird watching is the fastest growing hobby in North America; it has created an increased sensitivity to the role of the environment in the well being of our wild birds. Feeding the backyard birds helps us see the connection between healthy bird habitat and the overall health of the ecosystem.

Every time we destroy natural habitat to build houses and shopping malls, wild birds lose their homes. If each of us made the effort to turn our backyard into wild bird habitat, we could make a difference. It's important for us to invite birds into our backyard, providing them with food,

water, cover from predators, and places to raise young. Birds are a vital component of our environment: They eat fruit and disperse their seeds, they pollinate flowers, and they control insects. Improving habitat for birds improves the general condition of the environment, which will con-

*"...make a difference in the health of our planet's environment – one yard at a time!"*

tribute to an increase in overall diversity.

The diversity of the bird population is an indicator of the overall health of the ecosystem and can reflect habitat loss. Studies have concluded

that a lack of songbirds is often a sign that the area is in poor ecological condition. For instance, in a city area with few trees or in a house-dense suburb, you are likely to see only robins, sparrows, crows, and starlings. Well-treed suburbs and rural areas will also attract goldfinches, catbirds, titmice, and blackbirds. Unspoiled, forested land will support warblers, woodpeckers, and tanagers.

What are the birds telling you about the condition of your neighborhood's ecosystem? Get together with your neighbors and invite wild birds into your yards. You can make a difference in the health of our planet's environment – one yard at a time!

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### Did You Know?

\* February is National Bird Feeding Month.

\* Cardinals can live up to 13 years. Since they don't migrate, one might spend all four seasons in the same backyard.

\* The Baltimore oriole got its name from its colors (black and orange), the same colors as the coat of arms of the Baron of Baltimore.

\* Cedar waxwings are named for the red tips on each wing which resemble sealing wax.

\* The cardinal was the first bird given recognition as a state bird (Kentucky, 1926). It is the state bird of 7 different states including Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana.

\* The downy woodpecker is so named because of the short, soft feathers around its nostrils.

\* An ornithologist is a zoologist who studies specific aspects of bird biology.

\* Birds are so numerous that if you stand outside for ten

minutes anywhere in North America during daylight hours, you will see or hear a bird.

\* Chickadees' energy needs are so great in the winter that they can't live much more than a day without food.

\* The front edges of owls' wings are serrated and stiff like the teeth of a comb; this disrupts the flow of air over the wing resulting in silent flight.

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## Species Specifics: Eastern Screech-Owl (*Otus asio*)

**H**ave you ever heard an eerie whinny-call or spooky monotone tremolo in the middle of the night or have you seen a small owl face peeking out of a tree hole or nesting box during the day? That sound and that face belong to the eastern screech-owl.

This 9" owl has yellow eyes, occurs in red or gray morphs, and is the only small eastern owl with ear tufts.

The screech-owl's range can vary from 10-100 acres depending on the concentration of food, which consists of small birds, insects, and rodents. Cavities, up to 30' above the ground in trees, birdhouses, or buildings, are

not just for nesting: screech-owls roost in nest holes and because they are preyed upon by larger owls at night, they cache food and eat in them, too.

Males start to defend one or more nesting sites within their range in late winter. Courtship begins in late winter or early spring when the male screech-owl leaves food in the nest hole or on a nearby tree limb in order to attract a female.

In early to mid-spring, 4-6 white eggs are incubated for about 30 days by the female only. For the first 2 weeks after hatching, the female broods the young and the male feeds them. During the third and fourth week both

parents feed the young as many as 10-70 times per night depending on the size of the meal (insects to small rodents). The young fledge at about 4 weeks but cannot fly; they climb about the tree using their bill and talons. After another week or so the young start following their parents around, gradually learning to hunt and feed on their own. The family stays together until fall, when the young disperse in all different directions, but usually not more than a mile from their original nest hole.

The adult pair stay on their range and may continue to use the same cavity for up to seven years!



(Photo courtesy of Marc Alverson)

## Five Winter Birdfeeding Tips

**1. Provide a Variety of Different Bird Feeders.** A hanging feeder will appeal most to seed-eating birds such as chickadees that feed naturally at tree level. Ground level platforms, or those just a few feet off the ground, will appeal to towhees and cardinals. Suet feeders will bring woodpeckers and many others, too! So a variety of feeders, with a variety of foods will bring the greatest variety of birds.

**2. Offer Shelter.** Shelter on a cold winter's night can be a life saver for wild birds. Your spring nest box, if cleaned out, can provide such shelter. And winter roosting boxes are available. Another backyard haven can be a pile of brush where birds can take

refuge from the elements.

**3. "Best" Seed: Black Oil Sunflower.** Not as appealing to pigeons, sparrows and some blackbirds, and accepted



eagerly by small songbirds. There are many good seed blends—but your birds will always love this pure favorite!

**4. Deal with Squirrels.** You can baffle them, and/or install squirrel-proof feeders. Be-

cause the fact is: if there is a squirrel on your feeder the birds won't come. In addition, though, you may start a distraction area just for them in another part of your yard—keep them busy with their own squirrel toys and corn-cobs!

**5. Provide Ice-Free Water.** Water is a necessity. In cold weather natural water sources freeze over. A heater in your bath or a heated bird-bath will create a winter oasis, drawing birds from neighboring areas.

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