

Common Backyard Birds Can Be Fun to Watch as Winter Approaches

by Scott_Staats

With snow now falling in Central Oregon, hungry birds will start coming to your feeders. Besides the fun of feeding birds, it's also entertaining to watch their behavior.

The mountain chickadee (*Parus gambeli*) is one of the most common birds in Oregon and a fun bird to watch. When I head out to the backyard to fill the feeders, these fearless little black and white birds are never too far away.

Mountain chickadee - All photos by Scott Staats The mountain chickadee is similar in appearance to the black-capped chickadee except for the white line, or eyestripe, over its eyes. It also has a short, pointy bill, a black bib and white cheeks.

Up in the forest, these birds are constantly moving in search of food, often in small flocks. They scour the trees and forest floor for insects, spiders and seeds. During this time of year, chickadees feed mainly on conifer seeds at higher elevations. In the backyard, they will come to feeders for sunflower seeds and suet.

Backyard bird-watching of species such as this mountain chickadee can be fun as winter sets in. Mountain chickadees often use animal fur for their nests and leave looser fur in the nest, which the female uses to cover the eggs when she leaves the nest. The birds like to hide food for later use. They often grab a seed from a feeder and hide it under the bark of a tree or bury it in the ground litter. Juvenile chickadees leave their home territories a few weeks after fledging and settle in a new area by late summer, usually remaining in that new territory the rest of their lives.

For me, watching bird behavior can be just as fun as spotting a new bird. One bird I like to watch in my backyard is the spotted towhee (*Pipilo maculatus*). This bird has a unique way of looking for its food, which can only be described as a backwards-scratching hop.

Spotted towhee (*Pipilo maculatus*) The ground-foraging towhee uses a two-footed scratching method, kicking both feet backward at the same time it jumps to locate food under the litter. In dry conditions, the towhee's movements are often loud in the underbrush and thickets, making it easy to locate.

In 1995, the rufous-sided towhee was split into two species, the eastern towhee and the spotted towhee. The spotted towhee has more white spots on its back and wings than the eastern towhee. It also has a black head, sides and tail along with red eyes, a white belly and rufous sides and flanks. Breeding Bird Surveys have indicated a significant increase in towhees since 1966.

Spotted towhees occasionally sun themselves, lying down on the ground with feathers spread. Although towhees feed mostly on the ground, they sometimes forage in trees as well, a practice that is most common in spring when feeding young. There are twenty-one different subspecies of spotted towhees, including three on islands off the Pacific Coast.

Pinyon Jay I have to groan when I hear the high-pitched calls of a flock of pinyon jays in the yard, especially after just putting out a few cans of seed. Sometimes I knock on the window or open the door and yell to scare them off since they'll have the seed gone in no time. And seed isn't cheap.

I realize the jays are native and our home is in their habitat, so I often let them feed for a few minutes then just happen to step out to get a breath of fresh air and perhaps clap my hands rather loudly. They are usually back as soon as I go inside.

Jays are among the smartest of all birds. Pinyon jays are very gregarious and gather in large noisy flocks of 20 to 50 birds. The birds are about 10 ½ inches in size, have a uniform dull blue coloration and a shorter tail than other jays. They can be found in juniper woodlands and ponderosa pine forests.

Their nest consists of twigs and bark supporting a cup of shredded bark, plant fibers, rootlets, paper and hair. The female is fed by the male during incubation and early brooding. Their diet is mostly seeds, fruits and

insects.

Flying and foraging flocks move in a wheeling mass with rear birds constantly replacing birds in front. Jays tend to store, nuts, seeds, pinecones and other food items in the soil or under loose litter, as well as in elevated niches and cracks. Iâ€™ve watched a small flock empty a sunflower feeder in under an hour.

Pinyon jays do not migrate, but wander in winter flocks of hundreds up to 1,000. Flocking together increases their chances of detecting the approach of predators as well as finding food. The jays store seeds in an expandable esophagus until finding a place to hide them.

As the snow falls outside, have the feeders filled, the binoculars, bird book and even the camera handy and sit by the window and enjoy the show.

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