

NATURE'S LABORATORY

“An unkindness of ravens.”

— Term of Venerly

Within the boundaries of the North American region exist approximately 810 bird species, 231 of which are common inhabitants and 43 of which are less often seen throughout Shasta County. With so many birds winging through the skies, how can we be expected to identify these denizens of the heavens? But with a trusted field guide and a pair of binoculars, even the novice birdwatcher can bring birds to their backyard.

Every year, an estimated 5 billion birds undergo a seasonal migration from one region to another, much like whales, fish, turtles and butterflies. Some birds like the Arctic Tern travel from the North Pole to the South Pole – and back again – every year, a distance of nearly 10,000 miles.

Birds travel to different regions to alternate between wintering habitats and breeding habitats. During the winter when there are limited food sources, some northern birds fly south to more mild temperatures and abundant food supplies. Here in Shasta County, northern and mountain birds take advantage of the Central Valley's milder climate and the Sacramento River to overwinter until spring.

Long distance migrants prefer to fly at night. To keep from getting lost, birds navigate their routes, or “flyways,” by way of the stars, setting sun, smells, topographic landmarks, and Earth's magnetic field. Birds prefer a good wind at their back, clear starry nights, and warm temperatures in which to fly.

When birds assemble, as they do during a migration, different birds are referred to by different names, or “terms of venerly.” Are you familiar with this dissimulation of bird names?

A rafter of turkeys

A party of jays

A paddling of ducks

A siege of herons

A charm of finches

A skein of geese

A tidings of magpies

A cast of hawks

A murder of crows
A bouquet of pheasants
A descent of woodpeckers
A parliament of owls

Birds can be found anywhere: Deserts, mountains, meadows, forests, even cities. While birds are usually more active early in the morning and in the late afternoon, during the winter birds are active throughout the day.

Hands On: To attract birds to your backyard, help your children design a bird-friendly backyard. Choose native flowering plants and fruit when landscaping; arrange decals on windows to prevent bird collisions; keep your cats indoors, or bell them; hang birdfeeders and nest boxes outside; and provide birdbaths for bathing and water.

Different foods will attract different birds. Bird seed mixtures are the best attractant in general. Black-oil sunflower seeds in particular provide a fattier meat content and are easier to open. Suet cakes are good for attracting birds that prefer insects, like nuthatches and woodpeckers. Nectar will help attract hummingbirds. Try other foods, such as popped popcorn, soaked raisins, oranges, melon seeds, grape jelly, mealworms, cooked potatoes, or peanuts, to see what birds they might attract.

To identify birds that frequent your feeders, have your children sketch or write down identifying characteristics of each bird species that visits. Take note of each bird's size, wingspan, shape, posture, bill shape, and distinctive markings. Then, sit down with them and flip through a field guide like the National Audubon Society's *The Sibley Guide to Birds* and help them match key characteristics with illustrations in the guide. You can get a checklist from your local Audubon Society so your children can keep track of every species they see.

In 1900, ornithologist Frank M. Chapman was sickened by the annual Yule-time slaughter of birds taken in the Christmas "side hunt." In response, Chapman arranged the first Christmas Bird Count (CBC), a yearly opportunity to monitor early-winter bird populations instead of killing them. The CBC is now 101 years strong, with more than 45,000 participants from all 50 states, every Canadian province, the Caribbean, Central and South America, and the Pacific Islands. Counts are performed within a 15 mile diameter circle during a 24-hour calendar day. CBC counts allow scientists to monitor bird populations and their environment over a long period of time. To learn more about participating in the CBC, visit www.birdsource.org.

If you'd like to participate closer to home, how about Project FeederWatch?

FeederWatch is a citizen-science program that allows birders to count birds that visit their backyard between November and April. Data are then compiled at the Cornell Lab of Ornithology to determine the population distribution and abundance of species that regularly attend bird feeders. Visit <http://birds.cornell.edu/pfw> to learn more.

Bird watching can be more than simply counting birds. While monitoring the feeding stations, children should keep their eyes out for irregularities. Birds, like people, come in different shapes and sizes. But some birds are grossly different from their kin.

Sometimes you might be visited by an albino, a bird with partially or fully white feathers. Red-tailed hawks, American robins, and blackbirds are especially prone to albinism.

Bald-headed birds are another common sight in birds like blue jays and northern cardinals. This phenomenon might be caused by molting, when birds replace their feathers in the summer or fall, or by feather mites or lice. Every year, more than half a million birds are banded by scientists to help track the timing and location of migration routes and to identify wintering grounds, so keep an eye out for birds sporting small multicolored or metal bands on their legs. Some birds undergo predictable "irruptions," winter appearances in regions where they don't normally overwinter. Some known irruptive species are the common redpoll and the evening grosbeak.

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