



THE PLAIN DEALER

Snowbound birders get their fill watching their backyard feeders - Aerial View

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These are the days when feeding the birds really makes a difference in their survival.

As anyone who heard my presentation at the National City Home & Garden Show last month knows, only about 20 percent of our common winter birds' diet comes from backyard feeders. But when there is a foot and a half of snow on the ground, the birds' access to the other 80 percent is severely limited.

With the birds forced to rely on humans for handouts, backyard birders - who include most bird-watchers and the vast majority of readers of this column - reaped the rewards last week, when even the most serious birders couldn't escape the confines of their drifted driveways.

How pitiful these tough little creatures looked, scratching for sustenance beneath the snow that fell incessantly throughout much of Friday and all of Saturday. Poor, poor finches, all puffed up against the driving wind, unsure whether to seek energy from seed or shelter in a conifer, an open garage or an inviting woodpile.

That's when birders often attain their best sightings - when birds are at their most vulnerable.

As usual, the birds seemed to know that a blizzard was coming, which may have explained why my feeders in Lakewood were covered Thursday and early Friday. They were bulking up for the Big One.

It started when my son Bret shook me from slumber with an excited announcement: A bright raspberry-red purple finch was on our sunflower-seed feeder. We had hosted the drab, brown-and-white female purple finches before, but this was our first male - and what a beauty he was.

At one point, the purple finch flew into the shrubs, where it alighted next to a friendly common redpoll. Pleased with our back-to-back hits, we spent the ensuing hour admiring the redpoll as it fed at the hanging thistle feeder, then visited the bird-bath for a sip of water - a new bird for that list.

The joys of window birding had only begun. Dozens of dark-eyed juncos and American goldfinches arrived to join in the backyard smorgasbord. Red-breasted and white-breasted nuthatches, downy and red-bellied woodpeckers and black-capped chickadees took turns at the suet feeders.

Tufted titmice and mourning doves, cardinals and blue jays, white-throated and song sparrows all sifted through the snow in search of seeds until a spot opened up on the feeder. The song sparrow hardly ever left.

As I prepared to settle in at the desk to write this column, I cast a final glance out the back window - just in time to catch sight of a red-tailed hawk as it swooped through the yard, probably hoping to snatch an unwary squirrel or feeder bird.

The hawk missed, but I didn't - capping a wintry weekend with one more cool bird.

Sightings

Feeder birds dominated the blizzard sighting reports. But before the storm hit, Liz McQuaid checked out the Lorain County Regional Airport, where she spotted rough-legged hawk, Northern harrier and short-eared owl. In the aftermath of the snowfall, Tim and Liz Colburn added Lapland longspur, horned lark, Eastern meadowlark, American kestrel, turkey vulture and bald eagle to the airport list.

Driving past the Brandywine golf course on Akron-Peninsula Road in the Cuyahoga Valley, Dave Lewis noticed a greater white-fronted goose feeding among a flock of Canadas.

On the Tuscarawas River in Akron, Gregory Bennett found ring-necked ducks, hooded mergansers, green-winged teal and lesser scaup.

Marie Morgan watched a flock of snow buntings and horned larks on the Szalay's cornfields at Bolanz and Riverview roads in the Cuyahoga Valley National Park. At her home feeders in Akron, she had a chipping sparrow, red-winged blackbirds and common grackles. A blackbird at Brian Parsons' feeder in Kirtland didn't look happy, he said.

While hiking a trail along Kendall Park Road in the national park, Patrick Coy kicked up an American woodcock.

Eastern bluebirds visited the feeders at Jim and Linda Koren's home in Hinckley.

A bald eagle at Lake Medina provided a thrill for Elaine Birch.

Common redpolls continue to appear in Northeast Ohio, including at the feeders of Shaun and Norm Pomiecko in Bainbridge Township, Glenn Obergefell in Mentor, Barb Partington in Munson Township and Susan Steinhouse in Moreland Hills, where she also welcomed a red-breasted nuthatch.

Dan Kramer of Dover, Bob Beason of Huron and Lyn Miller of Auburn Township had fox sparrows at their feeders.

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