

Seed-eating Birds

A great favourite is the plump strawberry-red Purple Finch, with a stout bill able to crack sunflower seeds. Also fond of sunflower seeds is the chunky Evening Grosbeak. Males are yellow with white wing patches, black tail and crown; females are gray with yellow patches. Hardly known here a dozen years ago, grosbeaks now breed in Nova Scotia and are a welcome sight at feeders in late fall, though you may tire of them by spring.

The little Slate-coloured Junco is a sparrow with dark gray upper side and white belly. Its white tail feathers flicker in flight. Flocks of juncos may descend on feeding stations, scratching seed from the ground. The White-throated Sparrow is best known as a summer resident, but occasional stragglers turn up at feeders. It's a large sparrow with black and white striped crown and white throat.

Blue Jays are noisy birds, easily known by their bright blue colour and crested head. Their long strong beak enables them to eat both seeds and insects. Watch for a Blue Jay to hold a sunflower seed against a branch with its toes, then hammer it open with its beak.

Suet-eating Birds

Suet for birds can be rendered, mixed with oats and seeds, and stored uncovered in the fridge. Suet-seed mixture stuffed into a half coconut shell or holes drilled in a log suits woodpeckers and nuthatches. Peanut butter and seed mixture is good too, but plain peanut butter could seal a beak shut. Avoid metal or wire mesh containers, because birds' tongues may freeze to them in cold weather.

The Black-capped Chickadee is a small plump gray bird with a long tail and black cap and bib. A seed-suet mix will attract chickadees, and they are often easily tamed at feeders. Chickadees are acrobatic birds, able to cling to swinging feeders and hang upside down to eat. They are an endless source of amusement.

Downy and Hairy Woodpeckers look much alike — black with white speckles, and a red spot on the back of the male's head. Their feeding activity on insects, eggs and larvae in tree bark is useful in controlling insects that damage trees. Woodpeckers relish sunflower seeds, swallowing them whole, but are most attracted by suet. The Hairy Woodpecker is larger than the Downy.

Nuthatches are small birds with large heads and bills, and short tails. Colour is blue-gray above, buff to rust below, with a dark eye-stripe on the Red-breasted Nuthatch. Call is a nasal "yank-yank". Nuthatches are nicknamed "upside-down birds" for their habit of running head-first down trees searching for insects. Feed them suet, especially in a hanging log feeder.

City Birds

A few bird species have solved the human problem by adapting to life with us. Generally, they have broad food preferences, aggressive behavior, and little discretion at nesting time. You might think of them as airborne weeds, but they are a part of our urban ecology.

Starlings have short tails and a triangular look in flight. In winter flecks of white dot their shiny bluish-black plumage. They were introduced to New York from Europe in 1890, and the first Nova Scotia report is from Dartmouth in 1915.

House or English Sparrows are another European import, usually the first to find and the last to leave a feeder.

Cowbirds were considered "infrequent" in 1950; now they are starting to overwinter here in large numbers. They are robin-size, males with a brown head and breast, black otherwise; females are a dull gray. They scavenge with other city birds.

Hawks — just a reminder that you feed the sparrows, and the sparrows feed the Sharp-shinned Hawk. This hawk is about 30cm high, blue to gray above and white beneath.

Text by Debra Burlison, N.S. Museum, with advice from the N.S. Bird Society.

Drawings courtesy of the National Museum of Natural Sciences and the Newfoundland Parks Division.



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Winter Birds and Feeders

It has been said by those who feed birds in winter that woodpeckers are glum and ill-natured; that Blue Jays are gluttonous and saucy; that nuthatches are testy and suspicious; and that Evening Grosbeaks are quarrelsome and greedy. But the chickadee is a little bundle of good nature and friendliness, confiding and trusting.

Robie Tufts, in The Birds of Nova Scotia

Winter is a good time to begin to look at birds. Only a dozen or so species frequent settled areas in winter, and most are easily recognized and interesting to watch. By setting out bird feeders you can attract birds not usually seen and draw old favourites closer.

Birds that normally winter in Nova Scotia are well adapted to conditions here. They eat weed seeds, berries, insect larvae and eggs, but in late fall and winter a feeding station can supplement this natural diet. Feeders are most important to the birds' survival in times of extreme cold or heavy snow when wild food is hidden or frozen. These are just the days when you might be tempted to skip the morning trip to fill the feeder. Don't give in! This is when the birds need you most. Sometimes birds that usually migrate south will stay very late in the season because a feeding station put out too early has been providing an easy food supply. Wait for cold weather, or you may find yourself the sole winter provider for a Song Sparrow, White-throated Sparrow, or Baltimore Oriole.

A feeding station can be put almost anywhere. As long as it is stocked, birds of some sort will eventually find it. An ideal site offers shelter from weather, but trees or bushes too nearby may give concealment to lurking cats. Birds seem to prefer an open space around the feeder itself. For comfortable birdwatching, put your feeder within view of a handy window.

Designs for bird feeders are abundant and imaginative, but the simplest ones are often the most successful. Birds that scratch for seed, like sparrows, will feed from seed scattered on a log or board on the snow. A hanging suet feeder will attract agile birds like chickadees, nuthatches and woodpeckers, and may discourage Starlings. Sunflower seeds lure Blue Jays, Evening Grosbeaks, and Purple Finches. Remember that birds have beaks and habits that adapt them to particular foods. Seed eaters with large beaks eat mixtures of sunflower seeds, corn, cracked grains, rolled oats, peanuts, or the small seeds in commercial packages. Birds that feed on insects need an animal product like suet (beef fat), rendered or just hung in a lump from trees or clothesline. House Sparrows, Starlings, Cowbirds and Pigeons will be the main visitors to a feeder stocked with table scraps. They are all-purpose eaters adapted to life around people.

Chances are that no matter what food you offer, those "urban birds" will be the first visitors. Don't discourage them at first, because their presence will attract other birds. Put out a large assortment of small feeders to lessen competition and attract the widest variety of birds.

Winter Birds

Feeders

Junco



Red-breasted Nuthatch



Starling



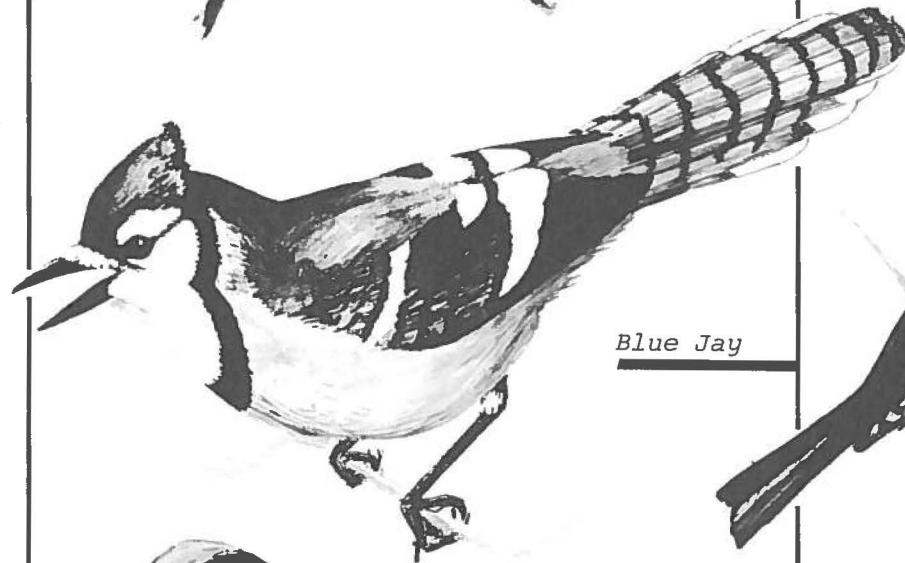
Evening Grosbeak



White-throated Sparrow



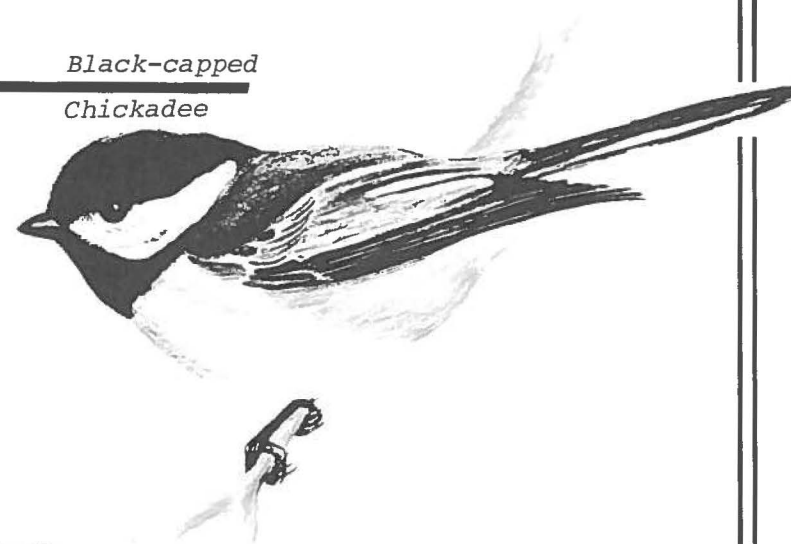
Blue Jay



House Sparrow



Black-capped Chickadee



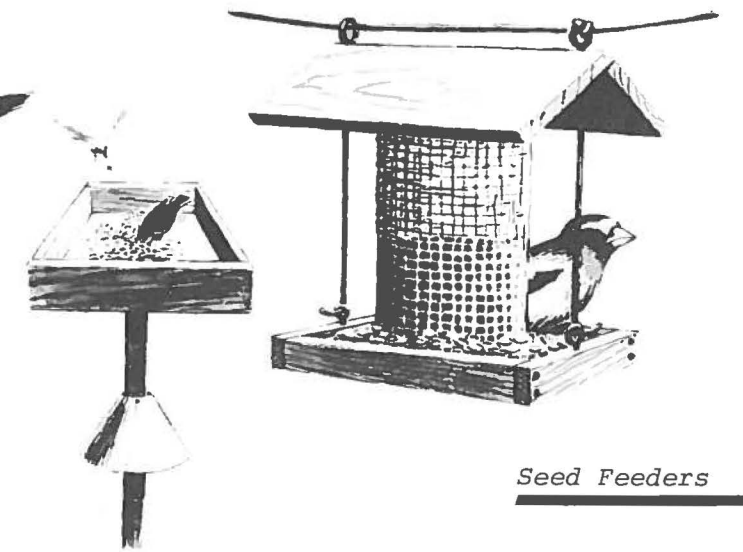
Cowbird



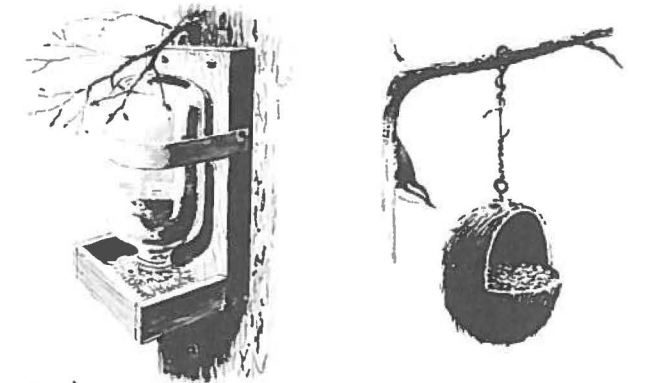
Downy Woodpecker



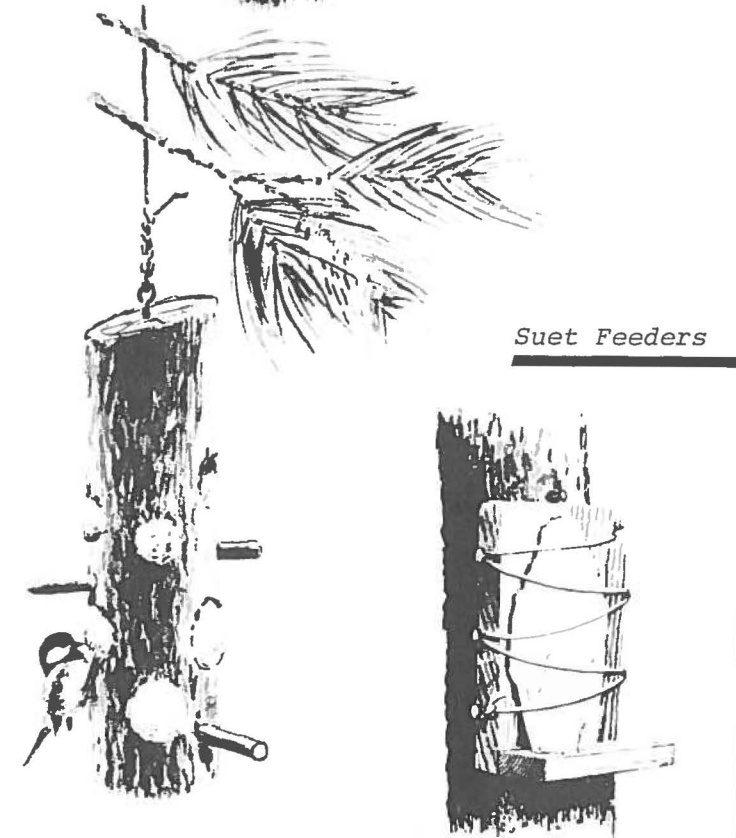
White-breasted Nuthatch



Seed Feeders



Suet Feeders



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