

Stayin' Alive

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Winter Survival Strategies of Birds in the Miramichi Region – a very brief insight.

Bald Eagles will often scavenge dead animals.



The winter season sees a large, to be expected, drop in the bird population in the Miramichi region and elsewhere in the colder parts of the northern hemisphere... but many birds remain. Those that don't migrate further south where it is warmer and food easier to find, have adapted over many millennia to survive and even thrive in our snow-covered frozen winter land. Well, how do they do it?

Although many people provide food for birds in their backyard bird feeders this obviously is not the whole story. Indeed, providing food for birds, particularly the smaller ones, does help to improve survival rates. Black-capped Chickadees can only store enough energy to last a day for example. Birds have been able to survive for many years of course without our helping hand. Food from bird feeders only provides a small portion of daily dietary needs.

Here are some of the ways that birds protect and fend for themselves in the Miramichi area and elsewhere during the

winter.

Berries and other decaying fruit: Bohemian Waxwings are one of the species that actually do migrate south in the winter but from quite far north so for many of them the Miramichi area is "south". They can often be seen in nomadic flocks landing in fruit and other trees, often in the hundreds. Some of their food is rotting apples still on the tree, mountain ash, winterberries and the like. They are seldom seen at feeders but are a pleasure to watch wherever you come across them. Other birds, such as American Robins and Pine Grosbeaks, can also be found foraging on fruit.

Storing food for later use: Many birds recognize when food is more plentiful and will prepare for harsher times by storing seeds etc. under tree bark, perhaps in cavities in trees, in spots they think other birds and mammals might have a difficult time finding. Often at feeders you can see birds picking up a seed, flying off to a nearby tree, not stopping to



A female Purple Finch eating tree buds.



Snow Buntings will find seeds on wind swept fields.

eat but depositing it, and returning quickly to repeat the process. They would do this in the wild too of course. Birds that do this include Black-capped Chickadees, Red and White Breasted Nuthatches, Blue Jays, Crows, and many others.

Finding shelter: At night when it is colder, birds will find a place to roost that is out of the wind such as in a thick hedge or in a tree cavity. Some species even “cuddle together” on a particularly frosty night. Bird feathers provide wonderful insulation. Birds, like humans, can shiver, the contracting muscles producing warmth. Ruffed Grouse are known to dive into a soft snow drift to spend the night, which sometimes is dangerous if there is rain followed by freezing temperatures and the bird becomes trapped. Birds too dress warmly. Feathers make great insulation and can be “fluffed up” like a padded winter coat to retain warmth.

Available winter food: Many birds are ground feeders and they are more likely to migrate for the winter as the snow cover can make life difficult. There is plenty of food available however, in addition to the rotting fruit mentioned above. Windswept fields where the snow doesn’t accumulate can provide food for another northern visitor, the Snow Bunting, which is happy to find seeds of grasses and other low growing but exposed plants. Wind swept areas also reduce the cover for field mice and other small rodents which keeps the rare visiting Snowy Owl alive. The Snowy Owl also likes open coastal waters and can feed on sea ducks.

Gray birch have a type of reproductive structure called a



Ruffed Grouse will find berries and buds in the woods and will dive into a soft snow drift to spend the night.

catkin which another northern visitor, the Common Redpoll, thrives on. A more local bird, the Pine Siskin includes these catkins in its diet as well. Some birds such as the Ruffed Grouse and the Purple Finch find tree buds a suitable food during the winter month.

Birds too can find dormant insects perhaps in various life stages under tree bark and other crevices. One such species that depends on this approach is the Brown Creeper feeding on what it finds in tree bark. White-winged and Red Crossbills feed on readily available conifer cones.

Included in the “available winter food” is of course the birds themselves. Yet another winter visitor from the north, the Northern Shrike, is a relatively small bird but is carnivorous and will catch small birds such as Black-capped Chickadees and Dark-eyed Juncos amongst other things. Some local hawks will decide not to go south for the winter and take their chances finding winter prey. Busy bird feeders can attract Coopers and Sharp-shinned Hawks, throughout the winter.

Winter offers a chance to see visiting species as well as our non-migratory resident birds, and we can see how they increase their food consumption and stay warm, having resisted travelling to a warmer climate.

For more information on Nature Miramichi visit: www.miramichinaturalistclub.com

Reference: BIRDS IN WINTER, Roger F. Pasquier, Princeton University Press, 2019



A Bohemian Waxwing eating berries.



Common Redpolls will eat gray birch catkins.