

FANTASTIC IN FEATHERS

Whether migrating thousands of miles or surviving Wyoming winters, birds are astounding

By Jacelyn Downey

You may have heard honking overhead that indicates migrating geese this fall.

All this noisy commotion signals the yearly abandonment of Wyoming by many bird species for a warmer, more accommodating location. As temperatures cool, days shorten, and the availability of food sources such as insects and plants decreases, many birds begin their yearly southward migration.

Some, like the rufous hummingbird, have quite a journey. Traveling more than 3,000 miles from its breeding range in Alaska to Mexico, this hummingbird might have taken advantage of your feeders and flower gardens briefly in spring and summer during this journey.

Overhead Interstates

Scientists have learned a great deal about the amazing journey birds make each year. Wyoming is part of the central flyway, a path birds in



Sandhill crane

the Great Plains region follow during their migrations. For example, Bullocks orioles will breed in an area from Wyoming to southern Canada in the summer and head to southern Mexico and Central America in the winter.

Birds travel along these highways in the sky stopping only to rest and eat.

They perform these amazing feats of traveling thousands of miles, avoiding hurdles such as power lines,

toxins, predators, and lack of suitable resting spots.

But, the birds that stay and survive our winters deserve our attention, too.

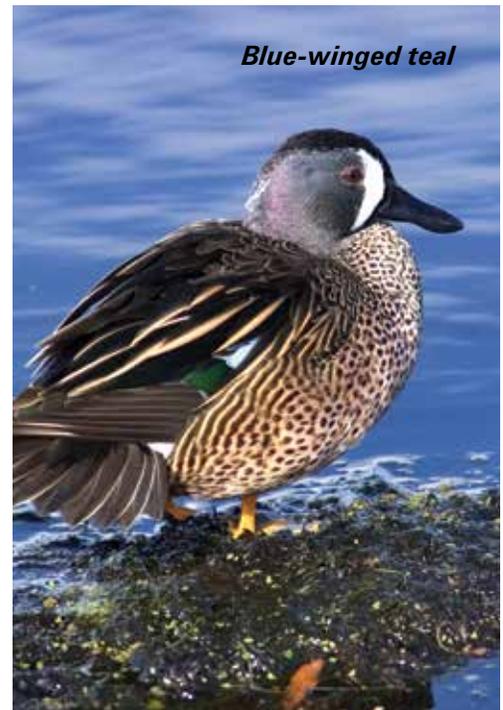
Luckily for us, many birds in Wyoming can tolerate the cold and winter diets. These birds depend upon seeds and other sources of high fat and protein-packed meals to survive. Even American robins, thought to be heralds of spring, may stay all



Cedar waxwing



Bullocks oriole



Blue-winged teal

HOW YOU CAN CONNECT

Get involved by joining a local Christmas Bird Count (<http://birds.audubon.org/christmas-bird-count>), by recording your winter visitors online with Project FeederWatch (<http://www.birds.cornell.edu/pfw>), or by participating in the Great Backyard Bird Count each President's Day Weekend (<http://www.birdsource.org/gbbc>).

winter feeding on lingering fruits such as juniper berries and chokecherries.

How do they do it?

Surviving Wyoming Winters

Storing caches of seeds, growing more feathers, building up fat reserves, shivering, and going into torpor, which means dropping body temperatures and slowing metabolic processes, are all ways birds adapt to our freezing winds and snow.

Birds will also change their diets from their summer fare. Seeds, berries, and even frozen carrion become important sources of food in the winter.

Is there anything you can do to help make their winter less formidable?

Feeders can help supplement natural diets. There are three types that will feed most visiting backyard birds.

- Thistle seed in a sock or tube feeder will attract American goldfinches, pine siskins, and redpolls.

- Black oil sunflower seed in a traditional hopper style feeder will attract larger birds like juncos, grosbeaks, and white-crowned sparrows.
- Suet, which is a fat mixed with meal or seeds, in a cage feeder will attract chickadees, nuthatches, and woodpeckers.

If you have fruiting trees, evergreens, or shrubs in your yard, you'll likely find Bohemian or cedar waxwings and robins taking advantage.

Birds that migrate

Sandhill crane *Grus canadensis*: Although Nebraska's Platte River may claim the fame of hosting cranes, you can find them throughout Wyoming with the greatest concentration on the western edge. Many of our populations will winter in the Bosque del Apache Reserve in New Mexico.

Bullocks oriole *Icterus bullockii*: These brightly colored birds are fond of nesting in cottonwood trees. Look for their nests made of woven

Yellow warbler



Common redpoll



White-breasted nuthatch



grasses hanging from branches. These birds will fly as far as Central America in the winter.

Blue-winged teal *Anas discors*: Teals are a welcome sight in the spring as they tend to be one of the first water birds to appear. They have been known to migrate from northern Canada to South America in less than a month.

Yellow warbler *Setophaga petechia*: Hard to believe a bird this small and seemingly fragile is able to travel as far as South America. To make the trip, they must eat insects constantly to build fat reserves.

Birds that stay

Common redpoll *Acanthis flammea*: Wyoming is one of the southern boundaries of this cold-hardy species. They bulk up their feathers, store seeds in specialized mouth pouches,

and even tunnel in the snow to survive.

Dark-eyed junco *Junco hyemalis*: These resident birds come down from higher elevations in winter to more open areas to form larger flocks. These seed-eaters are often found at feeders.

White-breasted nuthatch *Sitta carolinensis*: Look for these birds crawling on tree trunks. They use their beaks to forage for insects under bark. They will sometimes store seeds from bird feeders in tree cavities.

Cedar waxwing *Bombycilla cedroru*: Their name refers to the waxy red tips found on their wings and the fact they like to eat cedar berries. If you have a fruit-bearing tree in your yard, you are likely to encounter a flock of these birds.

Looking out your window during winter can reveal a whitewashed landscape seemingly devoid of life. Recalling the greenery of spring and summer can be difficult.

Were there really leaves on all the trees?

Fortunately, getting a glimpse of our winter birds reminds us that, come February, some of their fair-weather friends will begin to return, truly signaling the coming of spring.

Dark-eyed junco



Watching Wyoming birds come and go is a fun part of **Jacelyn Downey's** job as community naturalist for Audubon Rockies. You can reach her at (307) 756-3941 or jdowney@audubon.org.