



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

Fish and Wildlife Service

For release April 6, 1995

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BIRD LOVERS PROVIDE LIFELINE HELPING MANY SPECIES TO RECOVER

When snow blankets the ground in Tyngsboro, Massachusetts, Lillian Files reverently observes a rite of winter she began when she was a small girl in the 1940s.

She boils yellow raisins and dyes them the reddish color of sumac berries, then places them above the snow for bluebirds to eat along with sumac branches and berries she gathered and stored in the fall.

The ritual is an act of love for a woman who has made the care and feeding of bluebirds her vocation in life and scrupulously maintains 114 bluebird houses on her property. It also helps the birds, which normally feed on insects but will eat berries when necessary, survive the often harsh Massachusetts winter.

Wildlife biologists say people who feed and house birds have played a vital role in the recovery of a number of species of songbirds, including bluebirds.

"People once said you would never see a bluebird in Massachusetts," says Ms. Files, who travels around New England giving free lectures on the attractive songbird. "I'd ask the people I lectured who had ever seen a bluebird, and only one or two hands would go up. Now, I see a lot more hands going up."

Statistical information backs her up. According to the annual breeding bird survey, Eastern bluebird populations have climbed more than 2 percent a year since 1966.

Bluebirds normally nest in the hollows of mature trees, now far fewer in number than in the past. The manmade nesting sites maintained by people like Ms. Files offer an alternative that has been vital to the recovery of this species.

At the same time, many species have benefitted from the widespread popularity of recreational bird feeding. Populations of black-capped chickadees are up 28 percent since 1966 while ruby-throated hummingbirds are up 21 percent.

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"Loss of habitat has sharply diminished populations of many species of birds," said Fish and Wildlife Service Director Mollie Beattie. "People who feed birds and put up birdhouses fill a gap, allowing these species to recover."

Bird feeding in particular has become big business in recent years. A 1991 Fish and Wildlife Service survey found that 41 million Americans spend more than \$2 billion on birdseed each year. Industry officials say there has been a sales boom in the past few years.

"Bird feeding used to be almost entirely a winter activity," said Ralph Wells, information manager for the Wild Bird Feeding Institute, an industry trade group in Northbrook, Illinois. "Now we are seeing more and more people feeding birds throughout the year."

Wild Bird Unlimited of Indianapolis, Indiana, a franchise chain of specialty wild bird food stores, has grown to nearly 200 outlets nationwide, according to James Carpenter, the company's president.

The hobby remains a relatively inexpensive way to enjoy wildlife, Carpenter said.

"It's hard to find high-priced birdseed," he said. Most mixes contain some combination of millet, black-oil sunflower, milo, and safflower, although some birds like finches prefer thistle and others like woodpeckers hanker for suet.

A 1994 study conducted by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology found that birds that feed on the ground, such as the mourning dove and the white-throated sparrow, prefer millet over sunflower seeds and milo. Birds that feed in trees, such as cardinals and chickadees, overwhelmingly preferred black-oil sunflower seeds.

Bird feeding has become more specialized in recent years, said Bob Kramer of F.M. Brown's Sons Inc., a birdseed manufacturer in Sinking Spring, Pennsylvania. Over the years, the biggest change has been the introduction of black-oil sunflower seeds, which are popular with many species of birds, to mixes in the 1970s.

"Today, more and more customers are demanding higher quality mixes to attract specific species, at prices that sometimes are two or three times higher," Kramer said.

"It just shows how sophisticated the hobby has become," he said. "Twenty years ago, people just bought a bag of seed and threw it on the ground or put it in a feeder. Today, they are using specialty feeders and mixes to attract specific birds."

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Specialty mixes are not necessary, however. Sunflower seeds alone should attract plenty of birds to your yard.

Bird feeders themselves have gone upscale, with some models costing several hundred dollars that include features such as a built-in transmitter that will remotely broadcast the sound of birds eating and chirping into your living room.

Of course, a feeder can be as simple as a piece of scrap wood elevated a few inches above the ground with a few holes for drainage. The birds will quickly find it. (Unfortunately, so will squirrels, unless you take precautions--many feeders have features that keep squirrels out.)

Birdhouses to attract a variety of species also are widely available. The most popular currently include martins, bluebirds, and wrens.

Some serious bird lovers are going a step further and landscaping their property to attract birds. Various types of plants ranging from conifers to nectar-, nut-, berry-, and acorn-producers attract birds during different seasons. A healthy mix of vegetation can automatically provide food throughout the year.

The Service has produced "For the Birds," a package of three brochures on attracting and feeding birds. It is available for 50 cents plus \$1 shipping and handling from the Consumer Information Center, P.O. Box 100, Pueblo, Colorado 81002.

The Service is also co-sponsoring International Migratory Bird Day on May 13. This year's theme, "Sharing a Passion for Birds," will encourage bird lovers to call attention to both the economic and recreational benefits of bird watching, as well as highlight the problem of loss of habitat and declining numbers of some songbird species.

For more information, write: International Migratory Bird Day, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 4401 N. Fairfax Drive, Room 634, Arlington, VA 22203.



FISH & WILDLIFE SERVICE

Bulletin

U.S. Department of the Interior

What's going on?

AMERICA'S NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGES

A sampling of Earth Day events at national wildlife refuges:

- o **Mason Neck Refuge's Woodbridge Facility, Woodbridge, Virginia.** A 2-day extravaganza April 21 and 22 will feature wildlife demonstrations and environmental education activities. Eight local schools from the Washington, DC, area will participate in wildlife habitat activities. Wildlife demonstrations will include live mist-netting of songbirds, releasing striped bass into the Potomac River, and building bird houses. For reservations and more information, contact **Mason Neck NWR, 703-690-1297.**
- o **Want to get dirt under your fingernails, work up a sweat, and feel good about it?** Then **John Heinz NWR at Tinicum, outside Philadelphia, Pennsylvania,** is the place to be on April 29. It's the 11th Annual Darby Creek Clean-up and all are invited. Bring boots and gloves. Lunch will be provided. What a deal! For more information, contact **John Heinz NWR, 215-365-3118.**
- o **Minnesota Valley Refuge, Bloomington, Minnesota.** Community volunteers and a local Boy Scout troop will clean the refuge trails and parking areas on Saturday, April 22, followed by a cookout at the visitor center. To help out, contact **Minnesota Valley NWR, 612-854-5900.**

Into birds? Then a refuge is the place to visit during spring migration:

- o **Santa Ana NWR, McAllen, Texas.** This is the place to visit for the shorebird migration in April if you happen to be near the Texas Coast down Mexico way. Bird-walking tours are offered by reservation. Contact **Santa Ana NWR at 210-787-3079.**
- o **Grays Harbor NWR, Port Angeles, Washington.** Weekend shuttle buses will take birdwatchers to view upwards of 200,000 shorebirds. Shuttle bus runs on April 22-23 and 29-30. Contact **Grays Harbor NWR, 360-753-9467.**

- o **Snow Goose Festival at Kenai National Wildlife Refuge, Soldotna, Alaska.** Kenai Refuge and the City of Kenai jointly sponsor a season-long celebration of spring at this major stopover for migrating snow geese. The main event will be held Saturday, April 15. Contact Kenai NWR, 907-262-2021.
- o **Iroquois NWR, Alabama, New York,** will hold a Spring Migration open house April 23 with tours, exhibits, and views by remote video of a pair of nesting bald eagles. Up to 100,000 geese and 10,000 ducks may also be seen. Contact Iroquois NWR, 716-948-9154.
- o **Salt Plains NWR, Jet, Oklahoma.** Watchable Wildlife Weekends are being held throughout April in conjunction with Oklahoma Department of Wildlife Conservation. Contact Salt Plains NWR, 405-626-4794.

America's National Wildlife Refuge System is the world's most outstanding collection of lands and waters dedicated to wildlife. Since its beginning in 1903, the refuge system now numbers more than 504 units, with at least one in every state, encompassing 92 million acres. Some 30 million people visit national wildlife refuges every year for wildlife observation, photography, education, to hunt or fish, or just to relax and enjoy nature. Others, more than 21,000 people of all ages and walks of life, make a real commitment by volunteering nearly a million hours each year, valued at \$8 million.

April 14, 1995
B/NWR-03

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