

Bird Action in the Landscape

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If you make an effort to attract and observe the birds in your landscape this has been an exciting winter, and the action continues this spring.

The American goldfinches are in town in large numbers. Earlier in the winter they joined the flocks of lesser goldfinches in salvaging the remnants of the seeds in the sunflower patches and zinnia gardens. Now they are taking advantage of feeding stations that offer sunflower seeds and Niger thistle. They are larger than the lesser goldfinches with a more uniform feather pattern for both males and females. Although occasionally, a male which is converting to breeding foliage faster than his brethren will show up. Expect the American goldfinches to stay in the area into May.

On or about March 1, groups of purple martins showed up in town in large enough numbers for most martin house landlords to rush out to raise their houses. They have revisited my neighborhood several times since to check out the houses and do battle with the English sparrows. So far (mid-March) however, they have not moved in. In my experience the martins and sparrows will end up sharing the houses but if your martin house is not difficult to lower and raise, you may want to assist the purple martins by removing the English sparrow nests once before the martins move in.

Providing water with a birdbath or several, is very effective in attracting large numbers of individual birds and species to your landscape for easy observation. With our high evaporation rates and inclination for drought spells, the water source meets an essential need for the birds. Lots of birds will utilize your birdbaths for water in the summer but the water will attract some special birds now. Migrating species such as orioles, warblers, robins, and buntings will stop for a drink if you have cover and water available. Include a simple recirculating system to provide running water, and the water source will be especially effective. It is one of the best ways to attract painted and indigo buntings to your landscape during the migration season. Have your camera ready for great pictures.

Hummingbirds will be one of those species that will visit your water source this spring. More likely, however, you will spot migrants and returning black-chinned residents collecting nectar on some of the plants that are blooming now. Mexican honeysuckle, stocks, snapdragons, blue curl, rain lilies, poppies, larkspur, bluebonnets, columbine, and cross vine are likely to be nectar sources. The hummingbirds will also visit sugar water feeders with 4 parts water and one-part sugar if you hang them on the eaves or arbor.

Another species of birds that will take advantage of a reliable water source is the cedar waxwings. Flocks of the beautiful birds are moving through neighborhoods stripping the berries from ligustrum, pyracantha, hollies, and other plants. The flocks move in synchronization from the berry sources to the water sources. Unfortunately, they also excrete their droppings en masse after they have had a thirst-quenching drink. A patio, driveway and automobile can provide clear evidence of their visit, even if you missed it!

If you are providing too much seed and suet from your feeders to the squirrels, there are some tactics to try. Switch to steel Absolute brand feeders with weight sensitive perches. You can also replace all or a portion of your seed offering to safflower seed. The birds like it but not the squirrels. Another tactic that

I have found to be effective is to use pepper flavored seed and suet. The birds like it but the squirrels and even the raccoons don't care for it.