

Chirp 'n Chatter News

Chirp 'n Chatter, Tega Cay Village Shopping Center, Fort Mill, SC
Shops on Village Harbor, Lake Wylie, SC

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Feet



Humans usually have five toes on each foot, important for balance but not critical to carrying out activities of daily survival. Birds' toes and feet, however, are much more utilitarian, similar to our hands.

Ordinarily birds have four toes on each foot, three fanned forward and one pointed to the rear. While our feet are pretty much the same from one person to the next, birds' feet can be quite specialized, as in webbed for swimming. Songbirds stand on their toes, not the flat of their feet as humans do.

The feet of perching birds — sparrows, wrens, warblers, thrushes, to name a few — can do almost anything, from walking to hopping and nimbly holding onto nearly any object. When a bird lands on a perch, a tendon in the back of its leg tightens so the toes lock. This involuntary reflex keeps a sleeping bird from falling off a perch. The bird simply stands up and straightens its legs to unlock the tendon.

On most woodpeckers the toes are arranged with two turned forwards and two backward. This gives them better balance and stronger support for climbing or standing on rough and sometimes vertical surfaces.

The stubby legs of white-breasted nuthatches give them perfect balance no matter what their position. Their long toes and downturned claws adhere to the slightest rough surface, permitting them to dash headfirst down a tree in search of bugs in the bark.

And then there are hummingbirds, which do most of their feeding on the fly, so to speak. Their feet are tiny and so weakly developed that hummers are classified as the order "Apodiformes," which literally means "without feet."

Birds' feet and toes are mostly tough tendons and bones, covered with heavily scaled skin. There is a limited supply of nerves, blood vessels or muscles. This is why their feet do not stick to metal feeder perches when temperatures plummet. And when songbirds roost, their belly feathers cover their feet to keep them warm. If the weather is especially cold many songbirds will squat to cover their feet as they eat. Mother Nature has adequately provided birds with effective protection against wintry weather.

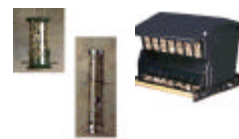
Interesting Bird Facts!

Did you know . . .

- ? . . . that the smallest hummingbird weighs one-tenth of an ounce? Yet this tiny creature's heart beats up to 1200 times a minute.
- ? . . . a hawk's eyesight is nearly eight times more acute than ours? Their retinas are packed with 1.5 million visual receptors. Humans have just 200,000.
- ? . . . that the Black-capped Chickadee can change its course within .03 seconds when frightened in flight?
- ? . . . that a Ruby-throated hummingbird's wings beat 50 to 70 times a second? If we expended energy at the same rate, we would have to evaporate 100 pounds of perspiration per hour to keep our skin temperature below the boiling point of water.

- ? . . . that taste probably isn't the reason birds choose what they eat? A dove has about 60 taste buds, a pigeon has between 27 and 59 and we humans have about 9,000.
- ? . . . that a hummingbird, a starling and a Canada goose all fly at a maximum speed of 50 to 56 miles per hour?
- ? . . . that Barn owls can find their prey in complete darkness using only their hearing to pinpoint the location of a mouse?
- ? . . . chaffinches, whose Latin name means "unmarried," are called "bachelor birds" because they congregate in flocks of one gender?
- ? . . . that a group of starlings is called a murmuration because they chatter so when they roost in the thousands.

February
is
National Bird
Feeding Month



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February 14-18, 2002



Squirrels Backyard Favorites!?!?

move their babies from one nest to another, possibly to escape predators. Squirrels do not mate for life and the

father deserts his family after mating. The life of the average squirrel in the wild lasts only ten to twelve months. Some of their enemies include large birds, such as woodpeckers, crows, blue jays and mockingbirds, who compete for the nut supply and harass the squirrels. Other enemies include hunters, the automobile, and predators such as cats, dogs, snakes, raccoons, hawks and owls.

Squirrels have very acute senses. Their vision enables a squirrel to distinguish one squirrel from another from 50 feet away. Their hearing is also excellent (try filling a bird feeder and see how many squirrels hear that quiet sound!). They have two peak times of activity during the day: early morning and mid-afternoon. In the winter they are active around noontime. They molt (lose their coat) twice a year and are either right or left-handed.

Squirrels can bury up to 25 nuts an hour. This is a communal activity, with all squirrels in the area benefiting from the buried food supply. A squirrel will eat its entire body weight in food each week (1-1 ½ pounds). Most bird lovers will tell you they eat that much in bird seed at their bird feeders. This can be a major problem in an area with a large squirrel population. Some bird enthusiasts claim that feeding the squirrels on the opposite side of the yard from the bird feeders can help keep them away. Others put squirrel baffles of all kinds on the posts supporting the bird feeders and above the bird feeders to discourage the squirrels.

Answers to Your Questions

Many of you have asked why there are unusually large flocks of birds flying toward Lake Wylie in the late afternoon and early evening.

In the winter, robins, starlings, grackles and cedar waxwings form mixed nomadic flocks, which can range in size from anywhere between 50 birds in the north to thousands in the south. The flocks break up in the day while foraging and then gather up again at night to roost in trees.

This year these mixed flocks were late to arrive and relatively few were reported in the Christmas Bird Count in the Carolinas.

The wintering range of these birds is affected by weather and natural food supply, but as long as food is available, these birds are able to withstand quite severe cold. Many of these birds do migrate, but their year-round range covers nearly all of the continental United States. Only the very northern edges of the central and eastern states that border Canada fall north of their winter range.

To attract robins and waxwings to your yard, try serving dried or fresh fruit and offer a source of water.

The Gray Squirrel can be found across the entire eastern United States, west to Iowa. It is gray above with a light underside and a bushy gray tail. The Fox Squirrel is larger than the Gray Squirrel and is found across the Eastern US, west to the Rockies. It is variable in color – gray in the northeast, rust in the west, and black in the south. The Southern Flying Squirrel is the smallest tree squirrel, grayish brown above and white underneath. It ranges across the eastern US, west to Minnesota. It is nocturnal and glides through the air from one tree to another, with a fold of skin between its front and back legs acting as a sail. It feeds on nuts and seeds like other squirrels but also enjoys insects and occasionally eats meat.

Squirrels live in various forests, preferring hardwoods or mixed woods, especially those with nut trees.

The squirrel's bushy tail serves many purposes: it can be an umbrella in the rain and a blanket in the winter. It also helps balance the squirrel in leaping from one tree branch to another.

This little fellow is a year-round resident seen mostly in the morning and evening in your yard. Most squirrels feed primarily on nuts, especially hickory nuts, acorns, beech nuts and walnuts. They also like fruit, maple seeds, tulip tree seeds and corn.

The squirrel's habit of burying nuts makes him a good propagator of many trees, as he does not bury his supply in one place, but spreads it around in the ground. He can smell a nut buried under a foot of snow in the winter.

Squirrels frequently nest in old woodpecker holes, as do many birds, or in natural cavities, particularly in standing dead trees. They may create a big, round, ragged nest of leaves, 12-16 inches across, which in winter, when the trees are bare, you may notice high in the trees. A smaller, flatter nest of leaves may be made in summer.

A litter of 3 to 4 babies is born in the spring, with sometimes a second litter later in the summer. Mother squirrels often

father deserts his family after mating.

The life of the average squirrel in the wild lasts only ten to twelve months. Some of their enemies include large birds, such as woodpeckers, crows, blue jays and mockingbirds, who compete for the nut supply and harass the squirrels. Other enemies include hunters, the automobile, and predators such as cats, dogs, snakes, raccoons, hawks and owls.

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Placing a bird feeder in a tree is like inviting the squirrels to lunch. A squirrel can jump six feet vertically, can jump across eight feet from one tree to another, and can climb up almost any surface except glass. So, to keep them away from the bird seed, place your feeder away from trees and other surfaces a squirrel can climb. A pole in the middle of your yard, with a baffle on the pole, and a bird feeder designed to discourage squirrels is about as squirrel-resistant as you can get. Then, put a few squirrel houses and squirrel feeders

Participating in the Great Backyard Bird Count is Easy

All you need is basic knowledge of bird identification and access to the Internet at home, a friend's house, your local library, school, or here at Chirp 'n Chatter.

Here's what you do:

- ? **Count the birds in your backyard**, local park, or other natural area on one or all four count days. You can count in as many different locations as you wish, just make sure to keep separate records and fill out a checklist for each area.
- ? **Watch the birds** for a least 15 minutes on each day that you participate. We recommend watching for a half-hour or more, so that you'll have a good sense of what birds are in your area.
- ? **How to count:** Your data will be used by scientists to analyze bird populations, so it is very important that everyone count their birds in exactly the same way. On the day(s) you count, watch your bird feeders, or take a short walk (less than 1 mile) in your neighborhood or park.

For each kind (species) of bird that you see, keep track of the **highest number of individuals** that you observe at any one time. Use a "Tally Sheet" to help keep track of your counts. Your tally sheet should look something like the following:

House Finch	3, 5, 4, 3
High Count =	5
Blue Jay	3, 6, 2, 3
High Count =	6

Be careful not to count the same bird over and over! Don't add another Blue Jay to your tally every time you see a Blue Jay at the feeder. You could be seeing the same individual

again and again. If you record only the highest number of individual birds that see in view at one time, you're sure to never count the same bird more than once!

- ? **At the end of the day** go to "Submit your bird checklist on the GBBC web site at www.birdsource.org. Fill out the questions about your location, local habitat, and count duration. Then enter your high counts for each species sited on that day and at that location. You can submit one bird checklist for each day that you count and for each location that you count in.

For example:

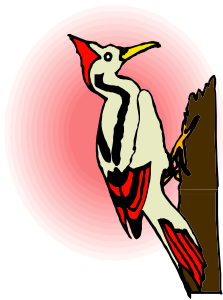
- ? If you count 4 days at one location, you'd submit 4 different checklists.
- ? If you count 4 days at two different locations, you'd submit 8 checklists.

If you don't have access to the Internet, bring your checklists to us and we'll enter the information for you.

The Great Backyard Bird Count is a joint project of Audubon and the Cornell Lab of Ornithology.

Please stop by McDowell Nature Center on Saturday, February 16 where you can sample shade grown coffee (it's grown on plantations that provide critical habitat for birds), pick up bird feeding tips, count checklists and even construct a free suet feeder.

Woodpeckers



sects in the wood siding.

If the drumming is territorial in nature it usually does not last all day and will lessen as the nesting season progresses. If you have eliminated the possibility of insects in the siding, the South Carolina Department of Natural Resources offers the following suggestions:

Nest box: Placing a nest box near or on a building provides the woodpecker with a cavity to nest in without destruction to property. The nest box should be filled with sawdust since part of woodpecker courtship involves nest excavation.

We've had several customers report problems with woodpeckers drumming on and damaging the wood siding on their homes. As a general rule, woodpeckers drum to establish nesting territories or to find in-

Visual Repellents: Hang a cut-out of a hawk silhouette from a ledge or eave near the affected area. The hawk silhouette blowing in the wind may scare the woodpecker away. An aluminum pie pan hanging on a string, streamers cut from garbage bags, or balloons may also work. This method should be employed as soon as the problem is identified and before the territories are well established.

Metal sheathing Metal sheathing placed over the pecked areas on a building will offer permanent protection from continued damage. Aluminum flashing is easy to work with to cover damaged sites. Metal sheathing can be disguised with paint or simulated painted wood grain to match siding. Quarter inch hardware cloth or welded wire has also been used to cover damaged areas and prevent further damage.

Repellents: Loud noises such as hand-clapping, toy cap pistols and banging garbage lids have been used to frighten woodpeckers from pecking on houses. Such

harassment, if repeated as the bird returns, may cause it to leave for good.

Suet: Placing a suet (beef fat) feeding station near damaged buildings has been recommended to entice birds away from the building or damaged area. This apparently works in some instances. It simply provides an attractive, time-consuming, alternative activity. Beef fat can be obtained from most butcher shops free of charge and suet cakes are available here at Chirp 'n Chatter.

According to the Cornell Laboratory of Ornithology some birds drum on siding to add minerals to their diet. Putting crushed egg shells in your feeder may satisfy this dietary deficiency and help to lessen the drumming.

Remember woodpeckers, like most wild birds, are protected and it is illegal to trap or harm them. For persistent problems, contact Animal Damage Control, 400 Northeast Drive, Suite C, Columbia, SC 29201 or call (803) 786-9455.

FEEDER INVADERS

BY

GREG BUTCHER

(This article was reprinted with permission from Bird-watch America and its quarterly magazine, *Birding*)

If you've been in the bird-feeding business for any length of time, you know that in some years lots of birds show up at feeders and in other years relatively few visit.

In some cases weather provides an obvious reason: Cold, snowy winters produce lots of birds both in the snowy areas and also south of the snow. When snow covers natural food supplies, some birds move a small distance to visit nearby feeders while others fly south before looking for new food supplies, which often include feeders.

Other birds are common some years and rare other years without an obvious connection to the weather. These are called irruptive species or invaders because they show up unexpectedly in large numbers. Irruptive species have been studied for many years. In some cases, we can predict when and where they will appear, but at other times everyone is surprised.

Many of the irruptive species are related to each other and are called "winter finches" because many of the species in the group breed in Canada or the Rocky Mountains and are most often seen near population centers only in winter. Key species in this group are Evening and Pine Grosbeaks, Pine

Siskin, Common and Hoary Redpolls, Red-winged and White-winged Crossbills, and Purple and Cassin's Finch.

Other irruptive species that visit feeders or backyards include Red-breasted Nuthatch, Varied Thrush, Northern Goshawk, Northern Shrike, and Bohemian Waxwing. There are many irruptive species that are not usually found at feeders, such as Rough-legged Hawk and Snowy Owl.

In some years, most of the irruptive species appear together; in other years, one or two species will irrupt while the others do not. (In a non-irruption year, a species may be irrupting in another part of the country, or it may winter in its normal breeding range where few birders live.)

Irruption is often an every-other-year phenomenon. So if this year is bad for irruptive species in your area, at least one of them should show up next year. If this year is a "superflight," when lots of the above-listed birds invade your area together, you can be sure that next year will be quiet.

The timing of irruptions varies greatly. Crossbills can travel at any time of year. Red-breasted Nuthatches will often move in late summer. Many of the winter finches first start appearing outside their breeding range in early November.

Attracting these species is usually straightforward. All of these birds will be interested in water. The seed eaters mostly prefer sunflower seeds (often black oil or hulled) or nyjer (often called "thistle" or spelled "niger"). Northern Goshawk and Northern Shrike visit feeders to try to catch the

birds there.

Fruit eaters (waxwings, Pine Grosbeak, and Varied Thrush) are primarily attracted to trees and bushes that bear fruit, but will sometimes eat fruit provided at feeders, especially raisins and apple slices. Crossbills are usually found in conifers stripping seeds from cones, but occasionally descend to seed feeders.

For more about irruptive species, visit Bird-Source online at www.birdsource.org. There are several information areas on these birds, including Project FeederWatch, Movements of Bird Populations, Irruptive Bird Survey, Winter Finch Survey, Christmas Bird Count, and Great Backyard Bird Count.

Coming Events



Nature Walks

February 23
March 2, 16, 30
April 13, 27

Meet at the store at 7:30 AM. We'll car-pool to a local birding hotspot and return about 10:00. Bring your binoculars or borrow a pair at the store.

Chirp 'n Chatter

Your Local Backyard Nature Store

721 Crossroads Plaza

Fort Mill, SC 29715

Contact Us

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We look forward to hearing from you.

Dave & Marion Davenport, Owners