THE BACKYARD
WILDBIRD & NATURE STORE
ENJOYING NATURE IN YOUR OWN BACKYARD™

Birding in the Backyard

JANUARY 2025

R. Hocken

RUBY-CROWNED KINGLET

BY KELSEY

Ruby-crowned Kinglets move like they just drank a gallon of black coffee. They flit around in trees at full speed, wings constantly fluttering in a way that appears flighty and nervous as they go. In spite of their high energy antics, Kinglets are small, quiet birds that can be difficult to spot on the move.

Despite the name, the male's distinctive ruby crown isn't always visible. In fact, it's usually hidden. Most of the time, he will flash the ruby feathers on his head during nesting or when he gets excited or riled up. Otherwise, they lay flat on his head and nearly invisible amongst the olive feathers that cover most of this little songbird's body.

Ruby-crowned Kinglets are a small bird overall, with an equally little bill and short tail. Their body is an olive green all over and they have a white wing bar stacked on top of a black bar, and a partial white eye ring. The Ruby-crowned Kinglets that we can get around here are a little smaller and darker in colour compared to other areas in the species range.

Ruby-crowned Kinglets are similar in size and colouring to Golden-crowned Kinglets, though the Golden-crowned have a much more visible golden stripe on top of their head, and bolder facial markings. Ruby-crowned are also a more solitary bird, while Golden-crowned will flock together.

Kinglets are foragers, usually found high in tree foliage as they search for the spiders, pseudoscorpions, and varied insects they feed on.

R. Hocken

Their primarily insectivore lifestyle is supplemented by the occasional berry or seed.

Ruby-crowned Kinglets can nest as high as 100 feet off the ground, and the female chooses the nesting location. Nest sites are usually near the trunk, or suspended from little twigs and branches. The kinglet takes around 5 days to build her nest, which is composed of an outer layer of grasses, mosses, feathers, and spiderwebs and an inner layer of fine plant materials and fur. The nest is around four inches in diameter and requires constant maintenance to avoid disintegration.

In the winter, look for these kinglets in shrub-heavy habitats, forests, parks, and suburbs.

Male Varied Thrush VS Female Varied Thrush

Male (left) and Female (right)

Male Varied Thrush
—J. Morrison

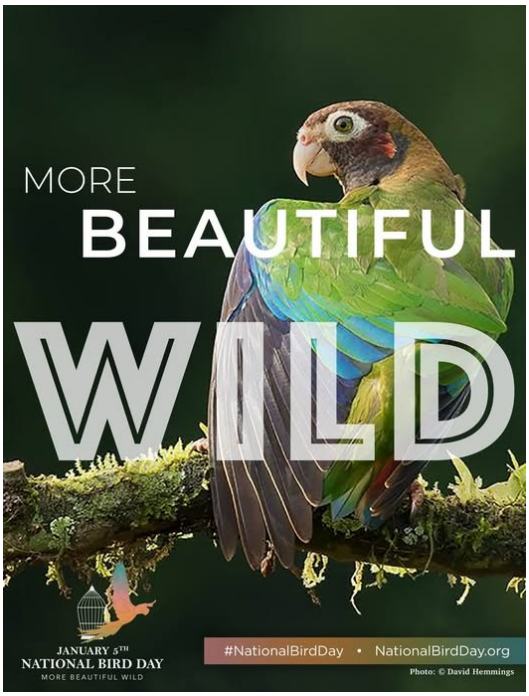
The male varied thrush is a large, stocky thrush with a rounded head and straight bill. They have a blue-gray back, black breast band, and a burnt orange belly. Over the eye is an orange eyestripe, and they have some orange barring in the wings.

The female Varied Thrush is similar in colouring to the male, but where he has blue-black, she is more brown. Overall, her colouring is duller with a paler orange belly, eyestripe, and wing bars.

Juveniles are distinguished from the female by their much paler eyestripe and grayish, spotted breast.

Varied Thrush are common backyard visitors during the winter months, especially under feeders. They also enjoy open tray or hopper style feeders full of black oil sunflower seed and white millet, where available. Look for them in forested areas, or foraging through the leaf litter.

Female Varied Thrush
—R. Hocken



Bird Snout Mugs

Ever wanted to be a bird? Adorably entertaining Snout Mugs give you the bill of a bird when you tip them up to have a sip.

Available in 7 designs for $26.99 ea.

National Bird Day

by Kelsey

The Avian Welfare Coalition's National Bird Day is celebrated annually on January 5th. The campaign seeks to reduce the suffering of captive and wild birds by raising public awareness around the bird trade and bird breeding mills, while also working to improve the welfare of already captive birds.

They hope that more people come to understand that exotic 'pet' birds such as parrots are more beautiful wild. The end goal of the campaign is for caged birds to be a thing of the past, and for everyone to enjoy the wild birds of the world in their natural habitats.

The theme for the 2024 National Bird Day was *Right to Flight*. It highlighted the importance of captive birds having sufficient space for flying, which is essential to birds' wellbeing. This coming National Bird Day, they are focusing on improving the welfare of captive birds that can't be released back into the wild.

Since it's conception in the early 2000s, National Bird Day is now celebrated across North America with partner organizations including the National Audubon Society, the Cornell Lab of Ornithology, and the National Wildlife Federation.

Birds Taste Bugs

BY KELSEY

For most creatures, chewing food releases chemicals that are crucial to the flavour. Birds, on the other hand, usually cram food down their throat in bite-sized chunks, and swallow. It's no wonder that people thought for years they didn't have any semblance of taste.

In actuality, many bird species do have tastebuds that, at least chemically, aren't that different from ours. In mammals like humans, most tastebuds are present on the tongue because we use the tongue to position food.

Birds, in comparison, have very few tastebuds, around 5%, on the tongue and those that are located there tend to be closer to the throat. Some species of ducks have the inside of their bill heavily covered in tastebuds, but most birds have a variable amount split between their tongue, palate, and near the esophagus. Most of the birds' tastebuds, around 70%, can be found on their palate.

The tastebuds of birds can be sorted into three categories based on shape and morphology. The first is known as *Type I*, which are present primarily in songbirds, chickens, and pigeons. *Type II* tastebuds can be found in ducks and wading birds, and *Type III* present in other birds is the one most alike to the tastebuds of mammals.

Birds don't have the same level of taste that mammals like humans do, but most are able to detect some level of salty, sour, umami (savory), and bitter, with fewer able to taste sweetness. Depending on the species, a bird will develop different combinations of taste receptors to best suit their diet.

Birds don't have much of an outward reaction to different tastes. Birds tasting something unpleasant may try to wipe it off their bill, or shake their head, but neutral or tasty flavours show very little behavioural cues. With the way their tastebuds are distributed, birds have to fully ingest something in order to get a good taste of it.

In mammals, the sweet receptors come from a gene sequence called *Tas1r2*, which birds don't have. Even birds that we know enjoy sweet things like sugar water and flower nectar don't have this sequence.

What a lot of birds do have are the gene sequences *Tas1r1* and *Tas1r3*, responsible for savory taste. The current theory believes that over time, these two sequences have evolved a protein that allows some birds, like hummingbirds, to taste sweetness.

Most birds do have the receptors for bitter flavours, likely as a survival mechanism to allow birds to avoid eating spoiled, unsafe, or toxic foods.

Carnivorous birds, on the other hand, are less sensitive to bitter tastes but have much better umami, or savory, detection to better suit their diet.

Bald Eagle—Flickr

Though birds can, in general, taste some level of most of the five taste groups, they are unable to detect capsaicin. Their lack of tastebuds for heat means that using hot pepper to deter mammals like squirrels and rodents does not affect your backyard birds.

Studies are still ongoing for the exact range of tastes that the various bird species are able to detect. There is a lot of variety between species, and a lot of research still to be done around the tastebuds of our birds.

References

https://bioengineering.hyperbook.mcgill.ca/taste-in-birds/
https://birdfact.com/articles/do-birds-have-taste-buds
https://birdfact.com/anatomy-and-physiology/nervous-system/sensory-perception-in-birds

Heaters & De-icers

Maintain an unfrozen bird bath even in sub-zero temperatures. Available in a range from 44 watts to 250 to suit a variety of bird baths. Most are thermostatically controlled to turn on and off automatically based on temperature.

Starting at $54.99

Hummingbird feeder heaters are also available to keep your hummingbird nectar unfrozen.

What do you get if you kiss a bird?

A peck on the cheek!


D. Veljacic

Pine Siskins vs Salmonella

BY KELSEY

Pine Siskins are a small, streaky finch around the same size as a goldfinch. Their bill is small and sharply pointed, and they have a short, notched tail. The wings are streaky with some yellow tones that are more visible when they flare their wings, but are otherwise visible as yellow barring.

They usually operate on a two year cycle; appearing en masse for two years before tapering off for two, and repeating. Pine Siskins do everything in a colony from feeding to travelling to breeding.

Pine Siskins are prone to not only catching diseases easily, but quickly spreading them through the rest of their colony due to their close contact. Salmonella is a common disease that Pine Siskins are highly susceptible to. Like other songbirds, siskins are highly unlikely to contract or spread avian flu, which is present in waterfowl and poultry flocks.

Pine Siskins who have caught salmonella may be lethargic and unwilling to move even if you come close. They are also likely to have ruffled, out of place feathers. If you've spotted a sick bird, there are a few things you can do to limit the spread.

If you've only found one sick bird, clean your feeders thoroughly with a bleach-water solution. Wear gloves and wash your hands frequently and well. Avoid handling ill or deceased birds as much as possible.

Watch at your feeder to see if you notice any other birds acting oddly. If you have multiple sick birds at backyard feeders, you can temporarily take feeders down and clean them, and your feeding area, thoroughly. Feeders can be left down for a short period of time, or moved to a new area at least six feet away.

To help prevent the spread of illnesses like salmonella, you can put out less seed at a time to cut down on the potential for bacteria growth. Seed that is eaten and replaced with fresh seed on a regular basis is less likely to develop harmful bacteria that can lead to birds getting sick.

You can also spread your feeders out instead of concentrating all your feeders in a small area. This discourages grouping and close contact between birds, meaning if one gets sick there is less risk of direct transmission.


D. Veljacic

Birds who are ill may

Be panting or breathing heavily.
Be unable or unwilling to move even if you approach or pick them up.
Sit on a feeder for a long period without eating.
Have puffed up feathers.
Display other abnormal behaviours.

If you find a sick bird

Wear gloves and wash hands thoroughly.
Avoid handling the bird as much as possible.
Call your local wildlife rehabilitator or vet office.
Clean and disinfect everything that they may have come in contact with.
If you have concerns about a dead bird you found, contact your local health department or the National Wildlife Health Center.

Who to contact on Vancouver Island

North Island Wildlife Recovery Center (250-248-8534)
MARS Wildlife Rescue (250-337-2021)
Wild Bird Reporting Line (1-866-431-2473)

Feeder Fresh

Feeder Fresh works best when placed in the wettest part of your feeder, or the part that spoils the most frequently. Usually, this is the very bottom of the feeder.

It can also be layered or blended with the seed. When layering, do about an inch of Feeder Fresh every few inches. When blending, mix thoroughly into seed before adding to the feeder.
Feeder Fresh is non-toxic and safe for bird consumption. Wild birds are likely to pick through it and eat the seeds around the Feeder Fresh, but if they do ingest any it shouldn't do any harm.

Starting at $20.99

Cleaner Bird Feeding

BY KELSEY

Feeding the birds can be a great, enjoyable past time for all ages. Keeping your feeders and the area around them clean and free of shells and dropped seeds is not only good for your birds' health, but it can make bird feeding even more fun. There are a few things to keep in mind when putting out bird seed in order to keep the area clean.

The first one is switching the seed you're using. Avoid wild bird general mixes, as birds will toss around the seeds to find their favourites. Having multiple feeders with a single type of seed in each can still attract a wide variety of birds, without the mess that comes with using mixed seeds.

Seeds in the shell, like black oil sunflower seed, can be great for keeping moisture out but are going to be messier than shelled seeds like chipped sunflower. Birds will pick the seeds in the shell by weight, tossing the lighter ones to the side. Birds are looking for the most reward for the least amount of effort to avoid wasting energy as much as possible.

When putting out bird seed, make sure to put out fresh seeds that our local birds love. Seed-eating birds don't love every seed equally, and they all have certain types they'll go for first. Some favourites include black oil sunflower seeds, peanut halves, and white millet. Different birds will enjoy different seeds, and choosing your backyard birds' favourites not only keeps them coming back, but cuts down on uneaten seeds left behind that may need to be discarded.

If you notice birds coming to your feeder but not eating your seeds, it's an indication that something is wrong. Whether it's stale seeds, the wrong types of seeds, or they're having difficulty using your chosen feeder, something isn't working right.

If they were eating the seeds and have stopped, it's likely they've gone stale. Stale bird seed isn't as attractive to your birds and should be thrown out and replaced with fresher seeds. If they don't seem to like it at all, try switching to a different seed they may like better.

Another thing to keep in mind is feeder style. Some birds can have a harder time on certain feeders, making them less likely to use the feeder even if it has seeds they enjoy.

If you have mostly sparrows and juncos, open tray style feeders are preferred, while chickadees will use almost anything, and woodpeckers are most attracted to halved peanuts or suet. Choosing a feeder based on who you are attracting or want to attract can make it more likely for birds to visit the feeder.

You can attract the widest variety of birds to a single feeder that is an open tray, fly-through, or hopper style filled with chipped sunflower seed. Open trays are easy for all types of birds to use, and chipped sunflower is enjoyed by all seed-eating birds. Another option is to put out multiple different feeders filled with different seeds to attract a variety of birds, and see who likes what the best.

If your birds are always tossing seed around, you can keep it from falling to the ground by adding a ground tray underneath the feeder, or hang a seed catcher off your feeder. Any seeds tossed out by your birds are more likely to fall into the tray below, keeping the ground cleaner and giving your birds another place to eat.

Putting out less seed at a time is another great way to cut down on messy feeding. With less to go through, even tossed seeds tend to be grabbed as less becomes available to choose from. You do have to fill your feeder more frequently, though in our wet weather that's not always a bad thing!

If none of these options are speaking to you, try switching from a loose seed or mix to a seed cylinder or seed cake. They're held together with bird safe gelatin, and your birds will have to peck their desired snack free. While some pieces can still fall as the birds peck away at the seeds, putting it on a tray or in a feeder can lower the risk of mess as well.

Bird Walks

Bird walks are on Sundays (Nanaimo) and Tuesdays (Parksville). Locations and cancellations are posted to thebirdstore.blogspot.com. **Bird walks are on pause until mid-January, weather depending. Updates will be posted to our blog and social media.**

The Sunday Bird Walk leaves The Backyard at 9 a.m. on Sunday mornings, or meets on location at 9:15 a.m.

The Parksville/Qualicum Beach Tuesday Bird Walk meet up location is the Parksville Tourist Information Center parking lot by Highway 19, Northwest Bay Rd. and Franklin's Gull Rd. in Parksville, also at 9 a.m., or on location at 9:15 a.m.

The Tuesday Bird Walk is not held during the summer months (July & August) but it resumes the first Tuesday in September. There is no charge for our bird walks, and they are designed to conclude before lunch (average approximately 2 hours).

We decide on the location of each bird walk the week before the scheduled bird walk outing. During the week we compile information about what birds are being seen and examine the weather forecast to ensure the walk is scheduled for the most productive location.

All experience levels welcome. Bring your own binoculars when possible for the best experience.

Check out our **online map** for common bird walk locations around Nanaimo and Parksville.

Hours of Operation

Monday-Saturday 9:30-5:30
Sunday 12:00-4:30

Upcoming Holiday Hours

February 17th, Family Day: CLOSED

Bird Sightings

Report bird sightings by emailing birding@thebackyard.ca or calling 250-390-3669

Dec. 8th

Red Crossbill over Yellow Point Road & Paulson Road.

Jan 1st

Mountain Bluebird at the Nanaimo River Estuary.
Green-tailed Towhee off Dallas Road & in Beacon Park, Victoria.
Tufted Duck in the Duncan Sewage Lagoon , Duncan.

Delivery Schedule for November

North Nanaimo to the Comox Valley
November 13th and **November 27th**
South Nanaimo to Duncan
November 6th and **November 20th**

Things to think about

Project FeederWatch

Is still running until April. It's not too late to get involved!

National Bird Day

January 5th is National Bird Day. Celebrate wild and domestic birds.

Squirrel Appreciation Day

Celebrate squirrels on January 21st.

Field Naturalist Groups

Nature Nanaimo | Arrowsmith Naturalists | Comox Valley Nature | Cowichan Valley Naturalist Society | Malaspina Naturalists | Rocky Point Bird Observatory | Saltspring Trail & Nature Club | Victoria Natural History Society | Yellowpoint Ecological Society

Contact us

6314 Metral Drive, Nanaimo, BC

250-390-3669
Toll Free 1-888-808-BIRD [2473]

info@thebackyard.ca
thebackyard.ca
thebirdstore.blogspot.com

Follow Us: @TheBackyardWildbirdStore
@thebirdstore_nanaimo