

R. Höcken

Birding IN THE Backyard

FEBRUARY 2025

NATIONAL BIRD FEEDING MONTH

SHARP-SHINNED HAWK

BY KELSEY

The smallest hawk in Canada, the Sharp-shinned Hawk is a daring, acrobatic flier with a long, square tipped tail and short, rounded wings. When spotted in flight, their small head just barely extends to the 'wrists' of their wings. They have a fairly distinctive flight pattern consisting of a few quick beats of their wings followed by a short glide.

Adult Sharp-shinned Hawks have a blue-gray back and wings with horizontal narrow, reddish copper bars on their white chest. Sometimes confused with Cooper's Hawks due to their similar colouring, Sharpies have a more squared-off tail compared to the rounded tail of the Cooper's. A member of the accipiter family, the females of both species are larger than their male counterparts. Female Sharpies are around the same size as a male Cooper's, while male Sharpies are roughly the same size as a Northern Flicker.

Sharp-shinned Hawks are pursuit predators that hunt on the wing, surprising their prey by rushing out from a hidden perch at high speed. They're versatile hunters, going after anything from birds and insects mid-flight to pouncing from a few feet above the ground after rodents. Sharpies use dense foliage as cover to stealthily get close to prey and pounce at close range rather than chasing it down or diving from high above.

Their long tail comes in handy as they fly at high speeds through dense foliage, acting as a rudder to help them steer. They will also fly hugging the ground in open areas to avoid being spotted by their prey until the last possible second.

If you watch the Sharp-shinned and Cooper's hunt, you can tell the two apart by how they go after prey. Sharp-shinned hawks will fly directly into a bush after songbirds, while Cooper's will land on the ground and hop around to try and scare the birds back out again.

During migration, look for Sharpies in open areas or high up in the sky along ridgelines. You may also find backyard feeders going suddenly very quiet and all your birds disappearing. This can mean that a predator like the Sharp-shinned is hanging out nearby.



J. Morrison

COOPER'S HAWK VS SHARP-SHINNED HAWK

MALE COOPER'S (LEFT) AND MALE SHARP-SHINNED (RIGHT)

Both hawks have a blue-gray back with reddish-orange streaks down their pale chest and a dark cap on their head.

THE COOPER'S HAWK is a mid-sized hawk about the size of a crow with broad, rounded wings and a long, banded tail. Their head is fairly large and squared off. During flight, the head projects beyond the wings and the rounded tail is easier to spot. Cooper's have a dark cap with lighter neck feathers separating it from their dark back. Their flight pattern is steady as they alternate between gliding and quick wingbeats.

THE SHARP-SHINNED HAWK is a small raptor, roughly the same size as a Flicker, with short, rounded wings and a square tipped, long tail that may have a notch in it. Their head is rounded and appears barely level with the wings during flight. Sharpies have a dark cap that extends into their back feathers like a hood. Their flight is agile and swift with their rapid wingbeats followed by short glides.



MALE SHARP-SHINNED HAWK
—J. MORRISON



MALE COOPER'S HAWK
—J. MORRISON

THE GREAT BACKYARD BIRD COUNT

BY KELSEY

Calling all citizen scientists! It's bird count time again.

Running from February 14-17th, the Great Backyard Bird Count was started in 1998 by the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and the National Audubon Society. In 2009, Birds Canada joined in to expand and support Canadian participation. By 2013, they began uploading the data into eBird, bringing the GBBC into the global sphere.



The project was the first of its kind to collect wild bird data through citizen science. The goal of the GBBC is to help scientists understand global bird populations, before they migrate for spring. The count has grown over the years, allowing scientists to create a road map of the birds and their behavioral trends. The GBBC helps answer questions like; how has the winter affected bird populations? Where are the irruptive species such as Pine Siskins, and where aren't they?

Participating is simple, easy, and can be done anywhere you can find birds. Decide on your bird watching location and if you will be participating alone or in a group. Settle yourself in for at least 15 minutes, then identify and mark down all the birds you see or hear for the duration of your participation. Identified birds can be entered into the Merlin app, or eBird to count towards the GBBC.

If you're already uploading bird sightings to either eBird or Merlin, any entries dated between the 14th and 17th will automatically count towards the Great Backyard Bird Count, so just keep up the good work. The count starts at midnight on the 14th and data can continue to be uploaded until March 1st, just back date the sighting to the correct day.



Audubon | Cornell Lab of Ornithology | National Audubon Society | Birds Canada



S. Clarke

Bird ID Posters

Not sure what that bird sitting on your feeder is? Bird ID posters from Vancouver Island photographer Stuart Clarke are a great way to quickly identify most common backyard visitors.

Non-laminated: \$11.99

Laminated: \$21.99



ALL ABOUT NESTING

BY KELSEY

WHO WOULD USE A NEST BOX?

Not all songbirds will use a nest box.

Local birds that will include chickadees, wrens, nuthatches, swallows, House Sparrows, woodpeckers, and Wood Ducks.

SHOULD I PUT ANYTHING INSIDE THE BOX?

It's recommended to leave the box empty during nesting season as the birds usually prefer to build the entire nest themselves. During the winter, you can line the box with woodchips to give small flocks somewhere to rest for the night.

WHERE SHOULD I PUT IT UP?

A nest boxes exact location depends on who you want using it. They should be put somewhere the hole is easily visible and not buried in branches, and ideally facing away from as much wind and rain as you can and out of direct sun.

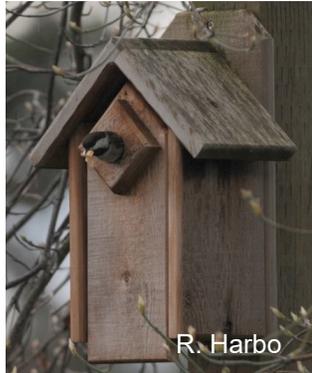
Chickadees, wrens, and nuthatches prefer boxes with some open space around them and a tree, bush, or shrub a few feet away to duck in and out of as they enter and exit the box.

Swallows, who swoop in and out of their nest boxes, prefer wide open areas to give them the space they need.

WHY AREN'T THE BIRDS USING THE BOX?

Birds can sometimes take a year or two before they use a nest box. Make sure when you put it up that the location matches with the birds you want nesting in it, and the entrance hole is easily visible. Box size and entrance hole size should also be considered. If either is too big or too small, it's less likely to be used.

Chickadees, wrens, and nuthatches can use entrance holes as small as 1 1/8" in diameter, but swallows need at least 1 3/8" to fit. If the box itself is too big, the work they'd have to put in to build the nest can be too much, making them look elsewhere for a more suitably sized cavity. If you've got it in a good spot, leave it for a minimum of two years to give the birds a chance to find and use it.



HOW DO I KEEP HOUSE SPARROWS OUT?

Chickadee boxes with their 1 1/8" entrance hole are usually too small for House Sparrows, but they can sometimes take over swallow boxes. Switching from a 1 3/8" round hole to an oval hole of 7/8" tall by 3 1/2" wide can deter the sparrow while still allowing the swallows entrance. They prefer the round hole when available, but with their ability to rotate their shoulders in flight, they can fit just fine into the smaller oval.

WHY DON'T I WANT TO HAVE A PERCH ON THE BOX?

The most common users of perches on nest boxes are predators. Nesting birds don't need the exterior perches and removing them can make it harder for predators to access the inside of the box. You can also make the entrance hole deeper for the same reasons.

CAN I PAINT MY NEST BOXES?

Yes! Lighter colours are recommended to help deflect heat, and only the outside of the box should be painted. Once the paint is fully dried and cured, the box is safe for use with your birds.

DO I NEED TO CLEAN THE BOX OUT?

We recommend cleaning old nests out of the box every fall. It not only encourages birds to nest in it the following spring, but it helps keep the box clean and free of parasites, spiders with their sticky webbing, and bees that may try to take over the box. Give it another look around February to clean out any debris from birds using it as a roosting box over winter.

WHAT DO I DO IF BEES START BUILDING A HIVE IN THE BOX?

Bees can sometimes start building their hives in the corner of nest boxes. If you spot it early enough to remove the beginning of the nest, you can rub a bar of soap around on the inside of the roof. The soap makes the wood waxy and bee hives no longer have anything to adhere to so they should move on.

WILL HUMMINGBIRDS USE A NEST BOX?

Hummingbirds are open nesters who will not use any kind of nest box, no matter how adorable they are. You can encourage hummingbirds to nest by putting up forked branches close under your soffits or by planting evergreen shrubs and bushes for them to nest in.



CEDAR NEST BOXES



Each box is made with a properly sized, deep entrance hole to allow nesting birds access while working to keep predators out.

They have no perches, and a ladder is cut into the inside of the door to help fledglings exit once they are old enough.

The box also has plenty of ventilation holes to help keep it from getting too warm, and the door hinges up for easy cleaning once nesting is complete.



What birds make the best accountants?

*Flamingosi
They're good at
balancing.*



SURVIVING THE COLD

BY KELSEY



M. Hamilton

THINKING ABOUT SPRING

Spring is approaching, though it may not yet feel that way. With spring comes an increase in bird activity as those who flew the coop and headed down south begin to make their way back, just in time for nesting. Bird flocks will start to dissipate as the birds instead pair up and begin claiming themselves a territory.

Keep an eye out as February comes to an end for our returning raptors, the Rufous hummingbirds, and other migrating birds. It's also approaching the time when birds begin to molt into their breeding plumage. Some birds, like the American Goldfinch, have a distinctive colour change while others grow new feathers that look basically identical to their winter plumage.

How do birds, especially the tiny hummingbirds, survive the cold weather? For all birds, survival means finding enough food to make it through the day. Birds live one day at a time and don't really stock up on energy. They start searching for food with the sunrise, and stop when the sun sets again. This doesn't leave them much leeway if the weather takes a turn, or their natural food sources are scarce.

During snowfall, some bird species become more reliant on the supplementary food sources in backyard feeders. With snow hiding seeds and berries, and the cold chasing insects away from the surface, it can be difficult for birds to find enough food to make it through the day. This is the time when backyard feeders, including suet feeders, can get very busy.

The importance of food is obvious, but water is also critical during winter since most of it ends up frozen. Providing a dish of water for the birds is useful and can help attract different birds that may not eat at your feeders. Make sure if you're putting out water you use a shallow dish (2" at the deepest) and keep it from freezing. Changing the water if it starts to frost over or adding a bird bath heater are some options to keep the water flowing.

As the sun sets, it's time for the birds to settle in and roost for the night. Many species have gathered into flocks for the winter, and these flocks will find a spot together to roost. Roosting spots can be a tree or shrub, an empty nest box, or a tree cavity. These roosting spots help shelter the birds from the weather. Roosting in a flock can also help the birds conserve a bit of energy through the night.

The Anna's hummingbird lives on Vancouver Island year round and does not migrate over winter. This is not, as some believe, due to the presence of hummingbird feeders but simply because the Anna's are a non-migratory species to begin with.

Having a hummingbird feeder up during winter can help provide these little birds with the energy they need to find food. Sugar-water gives them the energy to keep going but it doesn't provide them with any nutrition. Instead, the Anna's look for small insects and tree sap as a source of nutrients. During winter, there have even been a few reports of hummingbirds following Red-breasted Sapsuckers to feed at the sap wells that the sapsuckers make in trees.

Hummingbirds can find it difficult to keep warm at night due to their lack of down feathers. In order to conserve enough energy to survive until morning, hummingbirds enter a hypothermic state known as torpor. This torpor state allows hummingbirds to slow their metabolic rate and lower their body temperature. While in torpor, the hummingbird's heart rate drops from approximately 1200 beats a minute down to 50. Without this torpor state, the hummingbird's metabolism is so fast they could starve overnight.

If you do find a hummingbird in a suspected torpor state, the best thing to do is leave them alone and make sure that (if you have a hummingbird feeder) your nectar is out and unfrozen. It's very difficult to determine if the hummingbird is in a torpor, as they will be completely unresponsive until they've woken.



J. Shabbits

Nesting Material

Made with cotton batting, nesting material is a fun addition to any backyard. Hang it somewhere relatively dry that you can see, and watch which birds will come pull some free to add to their nest. When hanging, pull a few strands loose to make it easier for your birds.



Cage and Material: \$26.99 ea.

Material Refills: \$14.99 ea.

Cotton Ball: \$12.99 ea.



BEES WITH A SECRET HANDSHAKE?

BY DAVE

Mason bees are a diverse group of bees, with around 139 being native to North America. These bees are solitary in habit, not forming nests or colonies. They will, however, lay their eggs in cavities right next to one another. This habit, their early season emergence, and their fairly stubborn refusal to sting, makes them great for intentional culturing by gardeners who want their fruit trees and berry bushes pollinated.

In early spring, when the air temperature reaches a steady 13 for a few consecutive days; males will bust out of their cocoons, chew their way through the mud wall, make their way to the sunshine, and wait for the females to emerge. These temps coincide with fruit trees and early berry bushes, such as red flowering currant, blossoming.

When it comes to pollinating, it's the females that do the heavy lifting. Not only are the females larger, they also have parallel, pollen collecting hairs called *scopa* on their abdomen. These scopa are how the females transport pollen from flower to flower before heading to the cavities where they lay their eggs. Males are smaller and don't have the scopa; but, they do have a cute, light coloured tuft on their heads that make it look as if they have a beard.



Easy to culture with just some paper tubes, or a bee block, and a container to keep them together, they make a great addition to any yard with fruit trees and/or berry bushes.

Simply mount their nesting container with tubes on a sunny wall roughly 2m high off the ground. If they are already in the area the females will find the tubes, lay their eggs, separating each one with a mud wall (hence the common name, mason bee), until they are full. If they aren't already in your yard, we here at The Backyard Wildbird and Nature Store routinely carry cocoons from mid February until April. Buying them is a great way to start, or augment, your mason bee culture.

Other than switching out full tubes for empty ones during their laying season, they really don't need us to do much. Though, in order to stop the spread of pollen mites that eat the cash of pollen meant for the bee larva, folks can clean the cocoons during late autumn or winter. We recommend cleaning the cocoons outdoors or in a cool area, and limit your handling of the cocoons to keep them from warming up and coming out too early.

If you decide that you want to clean your cocoons, the method depends on the type of condo your bees are in. For those using reusable blocks, the block itself pulls apart to give you access to the cocoons, which should be gently scraped out of the block using a dulled flathead screwdriver, a pencil eraser, or something similar in size and not sharp to avoid piercing the cocoons. The block itself then needs to be cleaned and cleared of debris and dirt, before being taped tightly back together and replaced in the mason bee condo.

Paper or cardboard tubes need to be soaked in cold water until they are able to be easily unraveled. The cocoons themselves are waterproof, but fragile enough that trying to force the cardboard open when still stiff risks crushing the cocoons inside. The cardboard tubes are single use and your mason bee condo should be refilled with unused, clean tubes for the next year even if you decide against cleaning your cocoons.

Once your cocoons are out, give them a thorough swishing in cold water to remove visible mites and debris, followed by a quick dip in very diluted bleach (1 part bleach to 9 parts water) mixture to kill anything left on the cocoons.

Any cocoons that sink in the water aren't viable, and viable cocoons should be wrinkly, not taut. Cocoons that look super full and firm are likely parasitized by wasps and have no living mason bee inside. Non-viable or parasitized cocoons should be discarded to avoid issues with living bees.

Cleaned cocoons should be gently dried off and stored in a safe, breathable container in a cool spot until early spring.

The storage box can then be placed near the nesting box, and an escape hole opened.



MASON BEE SUPPLIES

Get your yard ready for mason bees with reusable nesting blocks, single use cardboard tubes, and condos for all your mason bee needs.

Cocoons are also available starting mid-February.



BIRD WALKS

Bird walks are on Sundays (Nanaimo) and Tuesdays (Parksville). Locations and cancellations are posted to thebirdstore.blogspot.com. **All bird walks are weather permitting and cancellations are posted to our blog by the morning of around 8:00 a.m.**

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

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

BIRD SIGHTINGS

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

JAN. 14TH

Common Redpoll at the Nanaimo River Estuary.
Evening Grosbeak in the Oliver Woods area.
Bohemian Waxwing over Buttertubs Marsh.
30+ *Yellow-rumped Warblers* over Buttertubs Marsh.

JAN. 15TH

2 *Green-winged Teals* at the Nanaimo River Estuary.

DELIVERY SCHEDULE FOR FEBRUARY

North Nanaimo to the Comox Valley
February 12th and February 26th
South Nanaimo to Duncan
February 5th and February 19th

THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

PREPARE FOR NESTING

Clean out any nest boxes and make sure they're visible to your birds.

RAPTOR MIGRATION

Raptors are on their way back north during February & March.

MASON BEES

Make sure your bees and condos are ready for the season.

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](#)

