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

Birding in the Backyard

APRIL 2025

R. Hocken

BRANT

BY KELSEY

Brant are compact geese with stubby bills, a black head, and a short, dark neck separated from the head by a white necklace. Their wings and back are brown fading into pale blackish underparts, paired with a white tail.

Brant arrive at their Arctic breeding grounds in early May. The birds are already paired up with their breeding partner, and immediately go in search of a nesting spot. Due to their chosen location, the window for nesting is small. They have to get it done after the snow and ice have melted, and before the bad weather makes it's return. Female Brant build their nests with various grasses, including plantlike grasses found near water sources. She then plucks down feathers from her breast to line the nest.

The down is used as a covering for her eggs when the female leaves them to find food. It serves as a camouflage and a way to keep the eggs warm while she's away. 24 days later, the young Brant hatch and quickly grow in size with the help of the abundant food supply. By the end of August, the Brant geese will make their way to Alaska's Izembek Lagoon, where they will wait until late October/early November before heading straight to California for the winter season.

By February, the Brant begin slowly making their way back to the Arctic. Unlike their single-minded trip south, Brant make plenty of pit stops as they head north in early spring. One of these pitstops is in the Parksville area of Vancouver Island, coinciding with the herring spawn.

The herring eggs, laid on seaweed by the billions, are a vital source of protein for these migratory birds as they make their way north for breeding. Brant flocks can number up to 3 thousand as they feed off the eggs alongside other waterbirds and marine mammals.

During the Brants' stopover on Vancouver Island, you can join the **Brant Wildlife Festival** in the Mount Arrowsmith Biosphere region, which aims to highlight the importance of critical habitats birds like the Brant need, as well as minimizing disturbances to wildlife.

Migrating shorebirds like Brant geese are a big part of the reason why most local beaches only allow dogs onto the beach during the colder months. This keeps pets from disturbing these migrating shorebirds as they head towards their breeding grounds.

brantfestival.bc.ca

The American Goldfinch

Male Goldfinch (left) and Female Goldfinch (right)

Male American Goldfinch
—J. Morrison

The male American Goldfinch is a small finch with a small, conical bill and long, notched tail. They're a brilliant yellow overall, with black wings marked with two white wingbars, and a black cap on their head.

The female Goldfinch has the same black wings and pale wingbars, though she lacks the black cap and has duller, olive-yellow feathers overall.

During the winter months, male American Goldfinch molt into duller, unstreaked brownish feathers with some yellow in the head and chest. They also lose their black forehead, though they retain the black wings with pale wingbars, helping to ID them.

Female American Goldfinch
—J. Morrison

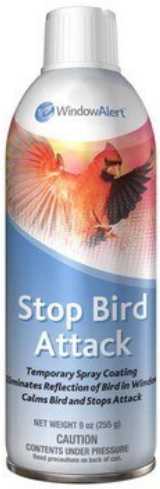
R. Hocken

Stop Bird Attack Spray

9oz. aerosol can.
Spray on white coating that temporarily eliminates reflections on your windows.

Without the reflection, the bird tends to stop attacking the windows.

$19.99 ea.



Attraction to Glass

by Colin

Each and every spring we begin with a common problem in our backyards; birds and their attraction to glass. This may either be a reflection they see, leading them to attack a window, or the problem of collisions when they think it's a flight path.

As this time of year is nesting season the birds now establish territories and will announce and fight off any intruders. If a bird sees themselves in a window they assume it is another bird in their territory and begin to battle. The bird will peck at the window and, when their reflection doesn't flee, become more aggressive, attacking the window harder and harder, until they begin flying at the window to rid of the seemingly unaffected intruder.

These window attacks can be very aggressive, but to solve the problem can be as easy as closing the curtain or blinds, or covering that particular part of the window with white paper to eliminate the reflection. Decals placed on the window may help but they do not eliminate the reflection which is the cause of the attacks. The problem of a bird attacking a window is short term and may only happen once and not year after year.

The other problem we have with glass is that birds can not see it and fly into a window or glass panel on the deck. Birds are energy efficient and will fly the shortest route, meaning if there are two windows opposite each other the birds think that they can fly through. One solution is to close the curtains on the opposite window or partially close the blinds so the birds are unable to see a clear way through. Window decals will also help as they will let them know something is in the way.

As a quick fix, stick some colored post-it notes on the window. Black and ultra violet decals are available along with other decorative decals to warn the birds of a window. It is best to place these decals on the outside of the window if possible in case there is a reflection in the window and the decals aren't always seen if placed on the inside. You can also move feeders closer to a problem window (within 3 feet) so there is only one way in and out of the feeder.

Glass panel railings are becoming a greater problem for bird strikes as the birds can see the sky through these panels. If this problem occurs try placing patio furniture in front of the glass to block any way through. Window decals or window paint can be used but it may require a lot of decals to cover the area. A black netting stretched over the glass panels will warn the birds of the glass panels and still allow you to enjoy the view through the netting.

To Bee Or Not—Never Mind Just To Bee

BY DAVE

It's happening soon; spring's warmth is on its way, and with it comes mason bees.

Now's the time to get your mason bee condos ready with fresh tubes or clean, sanitized blocks.

If you haven't already, there's still a little time to soak last year's tubes, or gently scrape out and clean your blocks.

Be sure to do this somewhere cool, and to use cool, not cold, water so your bees don't wake up early thinking it's time to pollinate. Viable cocoons have a full look with some dimpling, and will float, dud cocoons are heavily wrinkled, like raisins, and will sink, and parasitized cocoons are taut and bloated.

Discard any that are parasitized or sinking. Once sorted, you should give the good cocoons a dip in a 5% bleach wash. Let them soak for 5 minutes or so, and don't leave them in the bleach water for more than 15 minutes.

Remove cocoons from the cleaning dip and gently roll them on a clean cloth or paper towel to dry them.

Cocoons can be placed in a breathable container in a carport, garage, or shed, until outside temperatures reach a steady 12°C, when the container should be placed as close as possible to your condo, and opened enough for your bees to get out and get to work.

With your clean blocks and fresh tubes in place, you're ready to welcome the next generation of pollinators into your garden.

A Change of Tune

BY DAVE

Normally, bird songs are very slow to change, but not always. Back in the 1900s, *"Oh my sweet Canada Canada Canada"* was the refrain being sung by White-throated Sparrows across the country. But things began to change as we approached the twenty-first century, and a new ditty was heard.

In 2000 birders in BC started noticing a different, altered song was being sung. Instead of the three syllables of Canada, a stutter appeared, changing the song to "*Oh My Sweet Cana-Cana-Cana-da*". And apparently, it was a hit.

By 2004 this new song had spread about half way through Alberta. By 2014 every white throated sparrow in Alberta had adopted the song, and it was being heard in populations all the way into Ontario, 3000 km away from BC.

In an effort to work out what was happening, researchers fitted birds with wee bird tracking backpacks to see if western populations of White-throated Sparrows shared overwintering space with eastern populations where the eastern birds could pick up the new song. Guess what? They did!

So far the reason behind their changing song is unknown. Previous studies have found most female birds of any species preferred their local song variant. Female White-throated Sparrows, on the other hand, seemed to like the songs that are more atypical in their home range. This can be good news for those males that are changing things up.


V. Taylor

And you know what? 25 years after the last change these birds are starting to switch it up again!

Mason Bee Cocoons

When putting out your mason bee cocoons, leave them in the white cardboard box they come in. Open the flap on the box to reveal the round hole they use as an exit, and place the box on or near your mason bee house. When the bees hatch out, they will return to lay their eggs in the nearby tubes.

$19.99 PER PACK OF 10

Nesting Condos

Locally crafted cedar nesting condo with 40 single use cardboard tubes.

Fill the condo with fresh, unused tubes every year and store the filled tubes away in a garage, carport, or shed over the winter.

$39.49 EA.

Why was the crow sitting on the telephone wire?

He wanted to make a long distance caw!


J. Morrison

Hey, Who's in Charge Here?

BY KELSEY

What's really going on between the birds at your feeder? A lot more than just swinging by for a snack!

Wild birds operate under a hierarchy decided primarily by sex, age, and size. Males are usually dominant over females, older birds over younger, and larger birds of the same age over smaller. The hierarchies of wild birds affect how they interact with all other birds, not just their own species.

Watch closely at your backyard feeders, and you can start to notice the pecking order of visiting birds, sorted into dominant and submissive. Birds can be dominant to some birds, and submissive to others depending on a variety of factors. Some types of hierarchal behaviours are easier to spot than others, including *displacement*, *threat displays*, and *appeasement*.

Displacement happens when any bird gets out of the way of another. You may also notice displacement at work if you've ever had a row of birds all waiting their turn for the feeder, or seen birds scatter out of the way of a larger bird. The more dominant ones eat first, leaving the rest to wait until they've had their fill before moving in.

Threat displays are shown by more dominant birds to subordinate birds and predators alike, depending on the situation. They're used to convey aggressive intent and can include fluffed feathers, spread wings, and plenty of loud squawking.

Submissive birds also have a reason to communicate; de-escalating confrontations. They will often utilize appeasing behaviours such as shying away from interactions, avoiding eye contact and leaning away from more dominant birds, or curling in on themselves to show a smaller posture. Once the dominant bird has gone, you can see the subordinate regain their usual poise and attitude, even flaunting their own dominance over other more subordinate songbirds.

It does actually pay to be a bully for backyard birds. The more dominant birds are able to forage in safer locations than submissives, and are more likely to find, and hold on to, a decent territory and mate. They're also less likely to be preyed upon and have first pick at more abundant feeding grounds, meaning their overall survival rating is higher than submissive birds, who are left with slimmer pickings.

Dominance hierarchies in wild birds is part of what allows them to form organized social groups, or flocks, with minimal conflict, and more efficient feeding and breeding among flock members.

References:
https://www.allaboutbirds.org/news/power-struggles-are-playing-out-at-your-feeder-heres-what-to-look-for/
https://birdfact.com/bird-behavior/social-structures/dominance-hierarchies
https://www.allaboutbirds.org/news/when-136-bird-species-show-up-at-a-feeder-which-one-wins/
https://joyofbirdwatching.com/bird-feeder-pecking-order/

Minimizing Conflict At Backyard Feeders

More dominant (or more numerous) birds can often monopolise food sources like bird feeders. To limit the potential for more dominant birds becoming your only visitors, there are a few things to consider when putting out backyard feeders.

- **Spread your feeders out** over a wider area instead of congregating them all together. Not only does this make it difficult for dominant birds to control access, but it also helps minimize the risk for disease spread at feeders.

- **Put out multiple styles** of feeders and seeds to appeal to different birds, who have an easier or harder time on certain feeder styles, making it more likely you'll get a good variety without much conflict.

- **Hang feeders at varying heights** to cater to different birds and limit offensive interactions between species.

- **Choosing feeders with staggered feeding ports** (like tube feeders) can also make it more difficult for dominant birds to control access to the food source.

Planting Native

BY KOBE

If you want to attract birds, butterflies, and beneficial insects to your yard, there's no better way than by planting native plants. Not only do they provide essential food sources, but they also offer safe nesting spaces, shelter from predators, and places to forage.

Native plants have co-evolved with local wildlife; meaning they offer the right types of seeds, nectar, berries, and foliage at the right time of year. They are also adapted to our specific climate and pests, meaning they usually need much less support in terms of water and pest management, making them an eco-friendly choice for any garden!

Top Native Plants for Birds & Pollinators

Red-flowering Currant (*Ribes sanguineum*) - full sun to part shade

This early blooming shrub is a magnet for hummingbirds, especially Rufous hummingbirds returning from migration. The clusters of pink-red flowers provide nectar in early spring when food is scarce.

Oregon Grape (*Mahonia aquifolium*) - part shade to full sun

Oregon Grape is a great year-round option with bright yellow flowers in early spring that attract native pollinators, followed by deep purple berries loved by thrushes, waxwings, and towhees. It's also highly drought tolerant once established, and requires little maintenance.

Fireweed (*Chamerion angustfolium*) - full sun

One of the best native plants for pollinators, it comes back every year with long stalks topped with nectar-rich pink flowers in later summer.

Nodding Onion (*Allium cernuum*) - full sun to part shade

A short, grasslike plant that thrives in dryness. Produces stalks with delicate pink flowers that aren't only beautiful, but also provide nectar for bees and butterflies while being resistant to deer and rabbits.

Red Elderberry (*Sambucus racemosa*) - part sun to part shade

Tall, drought tolerant shrub producing white spring flowers for pollinators, followed by bright red summer berries loves by thrushes, finches, and grosbeaks. Don't eat them raw though, as birds process them far better than we do!

Western Columbine (*Aquilegia formosa*) - part shade to full sun

Another flowering plant that returns every year and is drought tolerant once established. With it's unique nodding red and yellow flowers, this spring bloomer is a hit with hummingbirds and native bees.

Goldenrod (*Solidago canadensis*) - full sun

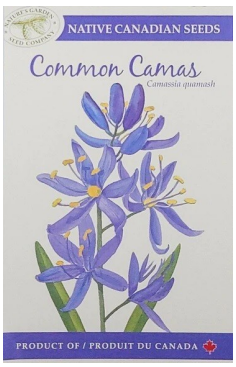
Grows in bunches of long stalks with yellow plumes of flowers at the top. An exceptionally drought tolerant plant, it supports over 100 species of native bees and butterflies, and it's seed heads feed sparrows and finches during the winter.

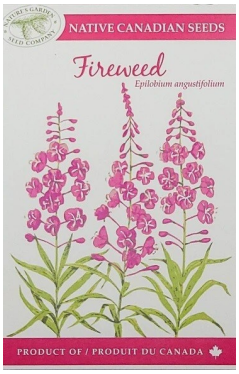
Looking to add native plants to your yard?

Come check out our selection of native plants seeds! Or visit Nanaimo's local plant nursery, owned by the Nanaimo & Area Land Trust (NALT), at 3145 Frost Road (out by the airport) for a wide selection.

You can also keep an eye out for plant sales hosted by conservation groups, and ask about native plants at your local plant nursery for even more options.

NALT Native Plant Nursery





Nature's Garden Seeds

Ethically sourced native plants to attract native pollinators, butterflies, and hummingbirds.

Each packet includes detailed germination instructions, printed on recycled paper.

A variety of native wildflowers are available, including Nodding Onion, Wild Columbine, and Fireweed.

Individual Species $5.99 EA. **Mixed Seeds** $8.99 EA.

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

April 18th, Good Friday: CLOSED

Bird Sightings

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

Mar. 3rd
Rufous Hummingbird at Drew Road, Qualicum.

Mar. 9th
American Goldfinch at a backyard feeder near Diver's Lake.

Mar. 26th
Yellow-rumped Warbler at Little Qualicum River Falls.

Mar. 27th
2 Turkey Vultures near Green Thumb Nursery.

Delivery Schedule for April

North Nanaimo to the Comox Valley
April 9th and **April 23rd**
South Nanaimo to Duncan
April 2nd and **April 16th**

Things to think about

Juveniles
Don't worry if you spot young birds running around on the ground instead of flying, it's a normal part of their growing up.

Goldfinch
Watch for that bright yellow little bird at feeders as the goldfinch arrive.

Brant Festival
Visit Parksville to see the Brant migrating through, stopping to feed on the herring spawn as they head north for breeding.

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

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