



R. Hocken

Birding IN THE Backyard

MAY 2025 — Celebrating 30 years

RED CROSSBILL

BY COLIN

There are 9 sub-species of Red Crossbill in North America, 6 of which have been identified in British Columbia. The Red Crossbill is a common finch, usually found feeding and flitting high amongst the treetops. They're what's known as an *irruptive* species, meaning they move around depending on where the food and conifer cone crops are best instead of staying in one place, or migrating by season.

Red Crossbills are a beautiful, unique bird with a strangely shaped bill that gives them their name. The upper and lower mandibles of these birds cross over at the tip of the bill instead of meeting like most other birds. It was previously thought that Mother Nature had gone horribly wrong with the crossbills, but their strangely shaped bills have a specific purpose; to more easily eat their preferred conifer cones.

When identifying the Red Crossbill, look for a bird that's slightly bigger than a House Finch, around 6 inches in size, with a heavy, parrot-like bill crossed at the tip.

Depending on the habitat and area some crossbills upper bill cross to the left and some will cross to the right. These bills are adaptable to the different regions. Look closely at the juvenile birds, as they do not have a crossed bill for at least a week or so after fledging from the nest.

The male is red in colour all over the body, with a brighter colour on the crown and rump. The wings may look darker with some red in them. Female crossbills are yellowish or olive coloured with some grey. Their song consists of several two-note phrases followed by a trill.

When the crossbills feed on the conifer cones they push their closed bill into the cone. Then they will open their bill, spreading or removing the scales of the cone to access the seeds, before using their spoon shaped tongue to retrieve the seed.



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Red Crossbills nest mainly in conifers and have been recorded nesting anywhere from late winter into August. The cup shaped nest is built out on a limb away from the tree trunk, anywhere from 6 to 40 feet high. Crossbills build their nests with twigs, grasses and bark strips, before lining it with feathers, hair and mosses.

The female will pick the location of the nest and lay 3 to 4 bluish, spotted eggs. Her partner is responsible for feeding her as she incubates the eggs.

Crossbills like to feed on the black oil sunflower seed when visiting the backyard. Their strong bill has no problem with opening the seeds. They also like to visit for a drink of water and bath, so providing a fresh water source can also attract these beautiful birds to your backyard.

THE YELLOW-RUMPED WARBLER

MYRTLE'S (LEFT) AND AUDUBON'S (RIGHT)



YELLOW RUMPED WARBLERS are fairly large warblers with large heads, sturdy bills, and long tails. During the spring and summer, these warblers are gray with some white in the wings & belly, and yellow in the face, sides, and rump. In the winter they're dull brown with some yellow on the sides and rump. There are two subspecies in North America.



THE YELLOW-RUMPED (MYRTLE) has a black mask and a white throat patch. The Myrtle is primarily found in the eastern USA and Canada's boreal forest, and can be seen on Vancouver Island mixed with the Audubon's.

THE YELLOW-RUMPED (AUDUBON) can be identified by their yellow throat, larger white patches in the wings, and lack of bold black facemask. They're found in the mountainous west of the USA and Canada.

YELLOW-RUMPED WARBLER (MYRTLE'S)
—J. MORRISON

YELLOW-RUMPED WARBLER (AUDUBON'S)
—J. MORRISON

LIGHT POLLUTION & NESTING

BY KELSEY

Volunteers with the citizen science project [NestWatch](#) discovered, through observation of over 58 thousand songbird nests, that increased noise and light pollution had an effect on the time the birds nested, the number of eggs laid, and other reproductive factors.

The more light a bird's eye is able to take in, the more likely it is they'll nest earlier when exposed to light pollution. Birds nesting in wet- or grasslands averaged nesting up to 30 days earlier, and forest-nesting birds up to 18 days earlier, in areas with more light pollution.

Though concerns arose around the availability of necessary food sources with this early nesting, studies showed that these earlier nesting birds actually had a *higher* chance of a successful nest than those that nested in darker areas and kept to their historical nesting pattern. But why?

It turns out that climate change has affected when the food sources are available, meaning that the earlier nesting birds have, in a sense, 'caught up' with the effects of global warming. Birds in darker areas that still nest at the same time they used to, however, are starting to find that the food sources they rely on may have already come and went before their young have hatched.

As well as the earlier nesting, areas with artificial night lighting have also noticed *diurnal*, or active during the day, birds are foraging or singing during the night. The light at night can be affecting the birds' ability to tell how long the day actually is, causing them to extend their activities deeper into the evening and night.

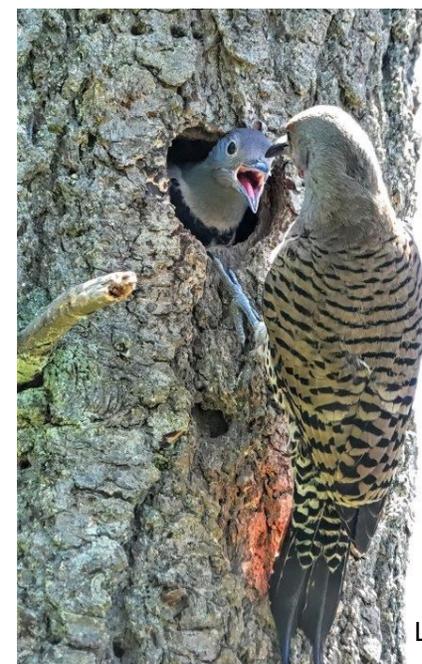
If you've ever heard a songbird happily singing away in the dark, or noticed them nesting earlier in the season, now you know why!



nestwatch.org

References

- <https://news.ncsu.edu/2020/11/11/noise-and-light-pollution-impact-songbird-reproduction/>
- <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2020/11/201111122823.htm>
- <https://royalsocietypublishing.org/doi/10.1098/rstb.2014.0126>



L. Stevens

Solar Fountains

Attract birds with the sound of moving water. Add a solar pump to any water feature 1 1/2" deep or deeper. Two available styles.

The Original Solar Pump \$39.99 ea.
The LED \$59.99 ea.



FAQs AROUND NESTING SEASON

BY KELSEY

NESTLINGS VS FLEDGLINGS: SHOULD I PUT IT BACK IN THE NEST?

Nestlings, or young birds with little to no feathers, should be placed back into their nest if you can find it. Fledglings, or young birds with most or all of their feathers, should be left alone unless there's imminent danger like a cat stalking it. Fledgling birds have left the nest on purpose.

WHY ISN'T THE JUVENILE FLYING AWAY AFTER IT LEAVES THE NEST?

Fledglings that have left the nest may not immediately fly away. Instead, you may spot them running around on the ground for a few days before they take off. Unless the bird is injured or in danger, it's best to let them be. Chances are the adult is watching nearby.

WHY IS THIS BIRD CHITTERING AT ME OR SWOOPING TOWARDS MY HEAD IN A CERTAIN AREA OF MY YARD?

They're likely protecting their nest. You're probably close to their nesting location or young, and they're trying to distract you before you find it. If you can, avoid the area as much as possible until they've completed nesting.

I'VE FOUND AN ORPHANED BABY BIRD, WHAT CAN I FEED IT?

The short answer is *don't*. Contact a licensed wildlife rehabilitator for assistance and advice, and don't try to offer the baby anything before consulting a professional.

MY CAT BROUGHT ME A BABY BIRD, WHAT DO I DO?

First, check for injuries. Blood, wings not folding fully, panting, or other signs of distress can be related to an injury. If no injury is found, place the bird in a sheltered location outside and keep your cat away from the area. If they are injured, you can call a licensed wildlife rehabilitator and see if they are able to take over care. Avoid trying to care for the bird yourself, as it can lead to more harm than good if you don't know what you're doing.

WHO DO I CALL IF I FIND AN INJURED BABY BIRD?

A licensed wildlife rehabilitator such as:

MARS - 250-337-2021

The North Island Wildlife Recovery Center

- 250-248-8534

The Wildlife Rehabilitators Network of British

Columbia - <https://www.wrnbc.org/contact/find-a-local-rehabilitator/>

You can also try contacting your local veterinary office for advice.

IF THEY'RE NESTING WHY ARE MY FEEDERS SO QUIET?

While the parents are nesting and feeding the young, they can be less active at backyard feeders. Most young birds are fed a primarily insect-based diet until they fledge, meaning the adults have less reason to visit seed feeders. Watch at your feeders for when the young come around after fledging. You may notice they sit near feeders and chirp, fluttering their wings with their bill open to encourage the adults to feed them, though they're very capable of feeding themselves.

I HAVE ONE HUMMINGBIRD WHO KEEPS CHASING EVERYONE ELSE OFF, SHOULD I PUT UP ANOTHER FEEDER?

You can, but put it out of sight of the other one. The male hummingbird will try to guard them both if he can see them, so putting it on another side of your house or behind something can make it harder for him to monopolize both.

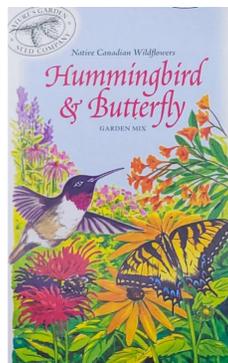
WHAT CAN I DO IF THEY NESTED SOMEWHERE INCONVENIENT?

Sometimes a bird will nest in a hanging basket, a wreath left on a door, or in a high traffic area around your house. If they're just starting to build the nest, you can dissuade them by removing the basket or wreath, covering the area, or hanging up something like bird scare tape (shiny tape that blows in the wind) to make them wary of the area.

Once the nest is established, try and avoid disturbing the nesting pair as much as possible until the young have fledged. Removing the nest once established is actually a federal offense and can net you a hefty fine. Enjoy the few weeks of watching the babies grow while you can!

SPRUCE UP YOUR YARD

Wall art, solar lights, wildflower seeds, kinetics and garden stakes, and more to add some whimsy and colour to your space.



Why did the bird get a ticket?

Because it broke the law of gravity!

BIRDS AND SMALL SPACES

BY COLIN



WHAT ABOUT HUMMINGBIRDS?

Another bird species that can be attracted to any area large or small and to great heights, such as the sixth or seventh floor of an apartment building, are hummingbirds.

A simple hummingbird feeder with nectar solution of one part sugar to three or four parts water, and no additives or dyes, is all that's needed to attract the hummingbirds.

Hummingbirds are at their busiest when the Rufous first arrive in March, before going a little quieter during May when nesting. Things become busier again in June and July when the young are out and flying.

Though the Rufous hummingbird is only here for a short time, our other local species, the Anna's, is around all year to visit your backyard feeder. They can be especially busy at feeders during the colder months, when food sources are scarcer.

Maintenance for a hummingbird feeder requires changing the sugar water solution every five days, or every three or less when the weather is hotter. It is also good to use a hummingbird feeder that does not leak to prevent a sticky mess in a small space.

Patio Tray Feeders

The Backyard's patio feeder is made for use when you have limited space. It has a removable tray for easy filling and cleaning. You can also switch the two layered mesh tray out for one of our 12" plastic dishes to use it as a bird bath.

Available in two sizes:
Tall (17 x 17 x 43") &
Short (17 x 17 x 30")

\$44.99 ea.



It's easy to attract birds to a large backyard, but what about a small patio or balcony? You may think that a vast area surrounded by a forest is necessary to attract birds, but it's the habitat itself that attracts them, not the size of it.

More birds may visit a larger habitat, but it's still possible to have a few species visiting smaller spaces.

Adding habitat to attract the birds can be as easy as adding a shrub or two, or small trees, in a planter clumped together in one spot. This will provide shelter and a perching spot for the birds as they arrive to check out your feeder.

Birds need a place to perch in order to check out your space, and make sure it's safe from predators. They will also settle on a perch after feeding, to digest their food before going back for more. You can also add a branch to a deck railing that sticks out into open air slightly, to act as a magnet and attract birds. This is especially effective in areas that have few or no trees.

In confined spaces, large feeders may not be practical. Using something small like a patio tray, or even a shallow dish or plate on a table is all that you need. To begin with, place the feeder near the edge of any overhang, and at least as high up as your railing if you have one. This makes it easier for the birds to find it. Once they've started coming, you can move the feeder further back into your preferred location.

When it comes to filling the feeder with seed it is best not to use any general wild bird mixes. They tend to have a lot of filler seeds that our birds do not eat, which ends up making the mess that no one wants as they toss out the unwanted seeds.

When feeding in a small space, or anywhere that you do not want mess or seed to grow, I recommend using hulled sunflower seed. The hulled sunflower seed is just the sunflower seed without the shell and slightly broken up. This seed attracts all the birds in the area such as the House Finch, American Goldfinch, Pine Siskin, most of the sparrow family, Northern Flicker, and all other seed eating birds.

When filling the feeder it is best to only place out a little bird seed at a time, just enough for the birds to eat in a day. Using just enough bird seed will help to keep the feeding area clean.

All bird feeding areas need to be kept clean whether large or small. Use a cleaning solution of one part bleach to nine parts water and keep it in a spray bottle will make cleaning the bird dish regularly very easy and healthy for the birds.

A SLUGS #1 ENEMY

BY DAVE

There are three species of garter snake on Vancouver Island, and if you're lucky you have at least one of them visiting your garden.

Garter with a slug—D. Veljacic

I say lucky not only because I personally love garter snakes, but also because they all, to varying extent, eat slugs.



The top spot for slug eating goes to the Northwestern garter, or *Thamnophis ordinoides*. Northwestern garter snakes also happen to be the smallest of the three species in BC, though the females are still larger than males. They usually top out at 60cm, but there are very rare records of them reaching 96cm. These beautiful little snakes eat slugs and earthworms almost exclusively.

Northwestern garters come in a wide variety of colours. They range from grays, to tans, browns, and olive tones. Melanistic individuals are also a common sight in some populations. Most Northwesterns also have a dorsal stripe that could be cream, pale yellow, orange, red, or in rare cases even blue.

Many individuals have dark speckles across their back, though they don't intrude on the dorsal stripe when present. Their bellies are grey, cream, blue, or light green, often with orange or red speckling.



D. Veljacic

Northwestern garter snakes can be found in a variety of habitats, including thickets, meadows, and forest clearings. Hydro cut lines make for great Northwestern haunts. They can also be found close to water, but are not dependent on aquatic habitats.

Being ectothermic, or cold blooded, snakes need an external heat source to warm themselves. You'll often find them basking in the morning sun before moving off to hunt. After hunting, they may be resting and digesting under a cover object that has been warming up in the sun all day.



D. Veljacic

PROMOTING GARTER SNAKES TO USE YOUR YARD

- Let some of your grass go un-mowed, and don't trim lower branches of shrubs.
- Add rock and log piles.
- Lay down sheets of plywood and/or sheet metal.
- Maintain a scruffy pile of yard waste.
- Have water available. A small pond, bog garden, regularly refilled ground level bird bath, or perpetually damp area makes for a great attractant.
- Build a *hibernaculum*, which is a place for them to brumate over winter.
 - *Brumation* is the reptile and amphibian equivalent to mammal hibernation.

If you want garter snakes in your yard, but there aren't any, please don't try relocating them. Snakes that have been relocated 1.6km or more have less than a 50% survival rate.

Instead, set up your yard as a great habitat and cross your fingers.

HUMMINGBIRD BEE REPELLENT

Naturally deter bees from hanging around your hummingbird feeder. Shake well before dispensing and spray around feeding ports in a sweeping motion. A light coating is all that's necessary.

Repels wasps, hornets, stinging insects, andrena, andrenidae, colletidae, & ants.

Ingredients: Eucalyptus oil, peppermint oil, geranium oil, cinnamon oil, distilled water, & citric acid.

\$22.99 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

May 19th, Victoria Day: CLOSED

BIRD SIGHTINGS

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

APR. 17ND

Townsend's Warbler at Superior Road, Lantzville.

APR. 18TH

Swainson's Thrush at Aulds Road/Arbutus Crescent, Lantzville.

APR. 21ST

Osprey at Long Lake.

APR. 22ND

Orange-crowned Warbler at The Backyard Wildbird & Nature Store.

DELIVERY SCHEDULE FOR MAY

North Nanaimo to the Comox Valley

May 14th and May 28th

South Nanaimo to Duncan

May 7th and May 21st

UPCOMING DATES TO REMEMBER

MAY IS

Be Kind to Animals Month

Garden for Wildlife Month

MAY 4TH

Bird Day & International Dawn Chorus Day

MAY 10TH

World Migratory Bird Day

MAY 20TH

World Bee Day

MAY 28TH

Whooping Crane Day

LOCAL 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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