

# Birding IN THE Backyard

MARCH 2025



R. Höcken

## GREAT BLUE HERON

BY KELSEY

The Great Blue Heron is one of those birds that really makes you believe they're descended from dinosaurs. They're North America's largest heron with long legs, a sinuous neck, and a thick, daggerlike yellow bill.

Great Blue Herons are a blue-grey overall with a wide black stripe over their eyes. The feather plumes on their head, chest, and wings give this bird a shaggy appearance. In flight you can see their two toned wings, with the darker flight feathers contrasting their paler forewings.

During flight, this large bird curls its neck in a distinct S shape that, paired with their broad, rounded wings, long extended legs, and slow wingbeats makes them easy to identify.

Great Blue Herons won't visit backyard feeders, instead stalking fish and other small prey in shallow water and open fields. While hunting, they wade slowly or freeze like a statue, before stabbing their bill forwards lightning-quick to pierce their prey.

These herons can be found in both salt and fresh water habitats, including backyard ponds if you're lucky (or unlucky, depending on how you see it). They may also forage in grassland or agricultural fields.

Pairs are usually monogamous, but may switch partners the next year. Watch for their elaborate courtship rituals including a ritualized greeting, where the male comes to the nest and the pair does a greeting call followed by the male

extending his neck up, showing off his throat feathers (known as a stretch display).

Another excellent example is the stick transfer ceremony. During this ceremony, the male heron offers his partner a stick for her nest, which is accepted when she does a stretch display, takes the stick, and adds it to her nest as her partner clacks his beak together repeatedly.

Male herons do most of the nest material collecting, presenting sticks to his female partner who builds the nest itself. Great Blue Heron nests consist of a platform and saucer-shaped cup lined with pine needles, moss, small twigs, and reeds. Nest building can take anywhere from three days to two weeks, and can be a simple platform or a more elaborate structure.

During breeding, Great Blue Herons usually nest high up in trees in groups called *heronries*, but can also be found nesting on the ground, in bushes, or on manmade structures so be sure to keep an eye out!



J. Morrison

# ANNA'S HUMMINGBIRD MALE VS FEMALE

## MALE ANNA'S (LEFT) AND FEMALE ANNA'S (RIGHT)

**THE MALE ANNA'S HUMMINGBIRD** is mostly green and gray, with a brilliant red-pink gorget and head that may appear dark or black in the wrong lighting. They're very tiny birds, but relatively large for a hummingbird with a straight bill.

**THE FEMALE ANNA'S** has a greenish back and a gray underside, along with blackish wings. Unlike the male's brilliant gorget, female Anna's have only a small iridescent patch on their throat.

Juvenile Anna's look a lot like the female, but watch their more uncertain behaviour, and look at the throat. Juvenile Anna's have no throat patch at all until they reach maturity, making it a quick identification mark.

*Fun Fact:* The Anna's hummingbird beats their wings between 40 and 50 times a second during flight!



MALE ANNA'S HUMMINGBIRD  
—J. MORRISON



FEMALE ANNA'S HUMMINGBIRD  
—R. HOCKEN

## HERE COME THE HUMMINGBIRDS

BY COLIN

It seems that spring is here, but there is something missing that would be the true indication of the season. That last piece of the puzzle is the arrival of the Rufous Hummingbird, which should be visiting feeders around Nanaimo in the next week. Are you ready?

Some may already have their hummingbird feeders out as they have had the non-migratory Anna's Hummingbird visiting all winter, but if you don't I recommend putting out hummingbird feeders around the first week of March, for any early-arriving Rufous.

Usually we see the Rufous Hummingbirds arrive as the Red Flowering Currant blooms, which have lots of buds waiting for the warm weather to arrive so they can begin blooming.

As the hummingbirds return they will be looking for food and, since natural food may be minimal for this time of year, they will frequent your hummingbird feeders. Hummingbirds are attracted to the colour red, this is why almost all hummingbird feeders have red in their design.

The sugar water mixture I recommend is (1) one part sugar to (3) three or (4) four parts water. Avoid adding food colouring to your sugar water mix, as this can cause throat infections in the hummingbirds, and don't use commercial honey when making your nectar mix, as this can also be harmful. If making a large quantity of nectar, you can bottle and store the remainder in the refrigerator for 2 to 3 weeks before you have to make more.

When the Rufous hummingbirds first arrive there will be lots of activity at feeders, especially if you live in a rural area with more habitat. To estimate how many hummingbirds are visiting your feeders, it's roughly 65 birds (not visits, *birds*) for every cup of sugar water you go through in a single day. This busy activity can subside around the end of April, as males establish their territories and females begin to nest. Once the young fledge, watch for activity increasing again before the Rufous begin their journey back south.



R. Hocken



R. Hocken

### Nectar Defender

Nectar Defender protects the birds and prevents nectar spoilage naturally up to 2 weeks, even in hot weather. Made with the micronutrient copper, which is naturally found in the hummingbirds food source in higher quantities. Great for use when taking a week or two vacation if you want to leave your feeder out without risking bacteria growth.

\$14.99 ea.



# HUMMINGBIRD COURTSHIP

BY KELSEY

Hummingbirds are a non-monogamous species and both the male and female can have multiple partners during their breeding season.

Once a female has entered the male's territory, he begins to court her with high, acrobatic dives. He flies high into the sky, up to 130 feet up, before plummeting towards the ground in front of the female. He waits until the last second to pull up from his dive, which can reach speeds up to 96 kilometers per hour, or 27 meters per second, and goes up to start it again.

Male Rufous swoop in a 'J' shape, where they come down, and then reverse their flightpath to go back up. At the bottom of their dive, when they are closest to the female, the Rufous male will chitter loudly at her before swooping back up for his next dive.



Male Anna's, on the other hand, do more of an oval shape when they dive. As the Anna's male hits the end of his drop and begins to ascend again, he moves his tail feathers to create a *pop* or *chirp* sound as air rushes over them. If you've ever been outside and heard some strange popping noises, you may be listening to his courtship dives.

As they continue their courtship, the male will chase a receptive female towards her nesting site, where she perches again. He will then perform something called a shuttle display, where he moves back and forth roughly a foot above her while keeping his body horizontal and his head aimed down towards the female.

During shuttle displays, the male will also often sing an intense song consisting of chirps and buzzing; sounds not usually associated with birdsong. Once breeding is complete, the male moves on to find a new partner while the female gets started with nesting.

# AFTER COURTSHIP

Once they've completed their courtship, the female does all the nest building and raising of the young by herself, while the male's job becomes resource guarding.

That one hummingbird who plants himself within view of all your hummingbird feeders and chases everyone off? That's him doing his job. You'll notice if you watch that certain hummingbirds are allowed to feed, which would be his partner, or partners, and young, while everyone else is chased off viciously.

The female's chosen nesting site is usually between 6 and 20 feet off the ground, on a horizontal branch in a tree or a shrub. They prefer areas with easy access to food sources. She builds her nest out of cattail down and spiderwebs, with lichen added for camouflage. Their nests are tiny, around the size of half a walnut shell, and due to the copious amounts of spiderwebs used for construction the nest will expand as the juveniles grow larger to accommodate them.

Rufous hummingbirds come north during the spring for nesting, while our year round residents, the Anna's, will nest at any time as long as the weather cooperates. We even had some males doing their courtship dives in January this year.



## References:

<https://www.britannica.com/video/courtship-hummingbird-Anna-display-flight-diving-male/-16543>  
<https://hummingbirdhobbyist.com/hummingbird-courtship-dives/>  
[https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Annas\\_Hummingbird/lifehistory](https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Annas_Hummingbird/lifehistory)  
[https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Rufous\\_Hummingbird/](https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Rufous_Hummingbird/)

## FEATHER FRIENDLY WINDOW DECALS



Pearl Feather Friendly decals are recommended for use in reflective areas such as windows, as they are more visible on the outside surface of the glass. Easy to use and suitable for all building types, Feather Friendly window decals are semi-permanent 'dots' that alert birds to something being in the way, and stops them from running into your windows.

You may notice the decals at first but as you adjust to having them up, you'll barely know they're there.

Comes with 1 100ft roll of decals, two paper measuring tapes, squeegee for application, and written instructions.



\$24.99 ea.

**What instrument  
does a chicken  
play?**

**The drums, because  
they already have  
the drumsticks!**



# BIRDS AND NESTING

BY COLIN



## JUNCO IN YOUR HANGING BASKET?

Have you ever gone to water a hanging basket and spotted a bird's nest in the middle? Chances are you have Dark-eyed Juncos!

Juncos are open nesters, so they won't use nest boxes. They do, however, seem to enjoy making a nest inside your hanging basket, seemingly overnight.

Once the nest is made, moving it isn't recommended. You can continue to water the basket carefully around the edges, and otherwise go about your day as normal. They made the nest there with the usual activity around it and it shouldn't bother them too much. You may get the adults sitting nearby chattering at you, trying to distract you from their nest though.

Eggs usually hatch 12-13 days after laying, and the juveniles leave the nest 10-13 days after hatching. Juncos are unlikely to reuse nests, but give them a week or so after the last brood to be sure they're done. Then you can resume normal watering.

Enjoy them while they're there, as it's not every day you can get a close up look at the nesting habits of local birds!



It is the beginning of the nesting season, a time that the birds begin to break from their flocks, establish territory and attract a partner. It all starts early in the morning just before the sun begins to rise with the singing of the male birds, such as the American Robin, Varied Thrush, Dark-eyed Junco, Bewick's Wren, and the drumming of the Northern Flicker creating the morning chorus.

Some of the birds that nest in our backyards are cavity nesters, such as Bewick's Wren, Chestnut-backed Chickadee, Red-breasted Nuthatch, Tree and Violet-green Swallows, and all species of woodpeckers. With less natural habitat in urban areas these birds will use other cavities such as nest boxes, attics, shoes and even pockets in a coat.

There are a few requirements for nest boxes that are beneficial for the birds and need to be considered, whether the nest box is built or purchased. The entrance hole is important as the size of the hole dictates what birds can use the box. An entrance hole of 1 inch to 1 1/8 of an inch hole will allow chickadee, wrens and nuthatches to enter while keeping out bigger birds.

For swallows it is best to use a 1 1/4 inch to 1 1/2 inch hole. Unfortunately when the entrance hole is this large it can allow unwanted or predator birds such as European Starlings or House Sparrows to get in. To deter House Sparrows from using swallow nest boxes, use an oval entrance hole that is 7/8 of an inch in height, and about 3 1/2 inches wide. The entrance hole on a nest box should also be about 6 inches above the floor. This helps to keep the eggs or young safe from predators.

Floor size is also important. For the smaller birds like chickadees, it only needs to be 4 inches by 4 inches, while swallows prefer 5 inches by 5 inches. If the box size is too big the birds may start to build a nest but abandon it part way through, as it is too much work.

For the Northern Flickers, the box should be larger. Around 8 inches by 8 inches with a height of 14 to 16 inches. The hole should be roughly 2 1/2 inches across, and placed 10 to 12 inches above the floor of the box. For any woodpecker box, it should be filled with wood chips as woodpeckers excavate a nest and the wood chips fulfill the role of the bird excavating a cavity.

In all nest boxes it is important that there is sufficient ventilation. This may be a number of holes drilled along either sides or a space above the door. This ventilation helps keep the birds from overheating.

It is best to mount a nest box so the wind and rain do not blow directly into the box. Also place it in the habitat of the bird that you are trying to attract. Swallows prefer an out in the open, straight in approach. Chickadees, wrens, and nuthatches prefer it near—but not buried in—trees or forested areas, as they like to land on a branch to check that no predator is following before darting into the box.

Nest boxes do not need to be mounted high, mine are on the side of my shed about 6 to 7 feet high and the Bewick's Wren and chickadees battle for it ever year. To help keep the box cool mount it out of the afternoon sun if possible and make sure there are ventilations holes. A nest box can be painted on the outside and it is best to use light colours the will reflect the heat. Bird feeders may hinder an occupant for your nest box, so it is best to keep the boxes a fair distance away from the feeders.

Once the nest box is occupied the activity and enjoyment of watching the progress is well worth the wait.

## Northern Flicker Nest Box

Got a woodpecker banging a large-ish hole in the side of your house? Chances are he's trying to build a nest! Empty and repair the area, then put a flicker box up over top to encourage the birds to nest there instead.



\$109.99 ea.



# IT'S NOT EASY BEING GREEN

OR GREEN AND COPPER, OR GREEN AND BROWN, OR COPPER AND BROWN, OR GREEN AND COPPER AND BROWN, OR BROWN...

BY DAVE

It's March, and some frogs are getting a little ornery.

British Columbia is home to two species of chorus frogs. Vancouver Island boasts one of the two species, the Pacific Chorus Frog (or *Pseudacris regilla*), alongside three other confirmed frog species, and one toad species.

Pacific Chorus Frogs, previously known as Pacific Tree Frogs, are roughly 5cm from snout to arse, and come in an array of greens, browns, grey, and copper. While their colours can vary depending on temperature, light, and humidity, they always have a brown stripe running from their snout through their eye to the shoulder, and a cream belly.



D. Veljacic

Male Pacific Chorus Frogs also have a dark throat, and both male and female have enlarged pads on their toes to aid them in climbing vertical surfaces. These toe pads are the reason they're commonly known as tree frogs.

Pacific Chorus Frogs are late winter and early spring breeders. During their breeding season, males will congregate along water edges to sing in chorus, often before the ice has fully melted. Females, drawn in by the cacophony, rush in to choose a mate based on the quality of the male's song. By the time you're reading this, you should be able to hear the singing (if you're near a breeding pond), so make sure to listen!

to choose a mate based on the quality of the male's song. By the time you're reading this, you should be able to hear the singing (if you're near a breeding pond), so make sure to listen!



D. Veljacic

These frogs are the most commonly heard frog in their range, which includes the coast of British Columbia down to California. In fact, Pacific Chorus frogs may be the most recognizable frog call in North America. If you've ever heard the croaking 'kek-ek' call in a film—or your neighbourhood—that's the chorus frog.



D. Veljacic

If you hear their calls in your neighbourhood and want to attract some to your garden, you can try adding a shallow, planted water feature to your landscape.

Ponds that are attractive to chorus frogs should include a shallow area that goldfish or koi can't reach, with emergent plants such as Cattails, Mare's Tail, and Sweet Flag and submerged feathery-leafed plants like Elodea, Hornwort, and Vallisneria, as well as branches and driftwood to transition the land into the water.

The area around the pond should have shrubs, and some objects on the ground to give frogs a place to hide. Despite being called tree frogs, these little cuties spend plenty of time under logs, leaf litter, rocks, and any other low cover objects they can find.

While fairly loyal to their breeding ponds, the sound of moving water can still attract a young male or two to check out a new area, who will in turn draw in some females. A single female Pacific Chorus Frog can lay between 400 and 750 eggs, in multiple small, gelatinous batches consisting of 10 to 80 eggs each. Once hatched, the tadpoles become froglets in 2 to 5 weeks, and then over two years the froglets mature to breeding age.



D. Veljacic

Despite their prolific breeding, immature Pacific Chorus Frogs are on the menu for many predators, meaning your pond won't be overrun by hundreds of mature tree frogs at prime breeding age. Too bad!

## FROG BOWL

CastArt bird baths are made in Victoria and stained with a weather resistance finish.

To extend the life of your bird bath dish it is recommended to cover, put away, or flip over the bird bath bowl during the winter to prevent pooling water from freezing and cracking the concrete.

This single piece concrete bowl weighs around 40lbs total, with dimensions of 13" x 13" x 6". Shown in Ancient Stone. Exact colouring may differ from image due to handmade nature of the bird bath.

\$109.99 ea.



# BIRD WALKS

Bird walks are on Sundays (Nanaimo) and Tuesdays (Parksville). Locations and cancellations are posted to [thebirdstore.blogspot.com](http://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

## CONTACT US

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# BIRD SIGHTINGS

Report bird sightings by emailing [birding@thebackyard.ca](mailto:birding@thebackyard.ca) or calling 250-390-3669

## FEB. 12TH

*Yellow-shafted Flicker* at Hammond Bay Road/Parkway.

## FEB. 14TH

*Northern Shoveler* in French Creek.  
*Long-tailed Ducks* in Deep Bay.

## FEB. 15TH

*Bohemian Waxwing* at Buttertubs Marsh.

## FEB. 16TH

*American Goldfinch* at a feeder in lower Lantzville.

## DELIVERY SCHEDULE FOR MARCH

### North Nanaimo to the Comox Valley

March 12th and March 26th

### South Nanaimo to Duncan

March 5th and March 19th

## THINGS TO THINK ABOUT

### NESTING

Watch in backyards and at nest boxes for bird activity and see if you can spot who's nesting in your yard.

### RUFIOUS HUMMINGBIRDS

Watch Red-flowering Currant—when it blooms, that's when the Rufous should be coming around.

### BRANT GEESE

Watch for Brant Geese up at Parksville beach and Rath Trevor Provincial Park.

## 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](#)

