



R. Höcken

Birding IN THE Backyard

OCTOBER 2025

NORTHERN SHRIKE

BY KELSEY

Often called a Butcher Bird, Northern Shrikes are adorable, pint-sized predators that prey on other birds, small mammals, and insects. They will often hunt more than they need, storing remaining prey by impaling it on thorns or barbed wire.

Northern Shrikes are small, chunky songbirds, with a bold black mask that stops before their stout, hooked bill. They are gray overall, with black in the wings and tail and a paler underside that often has fine, pale gray bars. Their long, rounded tail is edged in white, and when spotted in flight watch for the white flash in the wings.

Juvenile shrikes are brownish, and their face mask is faint. The barring on the underside is also more distinct on the young shrikes than on the adults.

They're stealthy hunters that skulk through dense brush, watching and monitoring potential prey to decide the best time to strike. While not prone to visiting backyard feeders for the seed, they may hang around looking for songbirds to go after.

Unlike raptors, Northern Shrikes don't have talons to aid them in catching prey. They do have strong feet that allow them to grip small songbirds in flight, and a notched bill called a *tomial tooth* that allows them to kill with a bite to the neck.

Northern Shrikes will capture their prey using a variety of tactics. They may hunt from a concealed perch, or perch somewhere high with good visibility.

When prey approaches their concealed form, the shrike will ambush and drive their prey to the ground. They are also fond of perching in high locations with good visibility, scanning for a target before chasing it down, capturing their prey by using their feet or bill.

They've also been known to drive songbirds to the ground to strike, or bank swiftly downwards and hovering for a split second before dropping onto small mammals.

Northern Shrikes are territorial all year round, often acting aggressively against other shrikes as well as other birds, even when the birds aren't competitors or prey. Shrikes have been known to go against birds as large as ducks.

During nesting, shrikes will guard around 7 acres around their chosen nesting site, and hunt within 360 acres—that's a lot of space! Female shrikes do all of the incubating of the young, and her partner feeds her at the nest. Once hatched, the pair both feed and care for the young until fledging, when they may divide the young between themselves before splitting up to finish teaching them.

Watch for Northern Shrikes during the fall and winter in wide fields and hedgerows, as well as in areas like the Nanaimo River Estuary.



J. Morrison

HOUSE FINCH VS PURPLE FINCH

MALE HOUSE FINCH (LEFT) AND MALE PURPLE FINCH (RIGHT)



HOUSE FINCH
—J. MORRISON

THE HOUSE FINCH is around 5 to 6 inches in size, with red on the breast, forehead, and rump. Usually a fairly bright red, the House Finch may also have a more yellow or peachy colour depending on their diet.

PURPLE FINCHES are slightly larger, and have more of a raspberry colour mixed with their overall brown body. The raspberry may appear to spread further over the body and down the back of the head.

Female House and Purple Finches are very similar in colour to each other, though if you get a good look the female Purple Finch has two white streaks, one behind the eye and the other on her cheek, paired with the grayish brown streaked body.



PURPLE FINCH
—J. MORRISON

HELPING HUMMINGBIRDS

BY KELSEY



K. Bosch

Our native Anna's hummingbirds are a non-migratory species that will stick around all winter...but what do they eat? All the flowers are gone!

Plenty of people may think that hummingbirds rely exclusively on nectar from flowers and feeders as their food source, but that isn't quite accurate.

Hummingbirds also feed on soft bodied insects like fruit flies, midges, small spiders, or leaf hoppers. Insects are plucked from under leaves and crevices, or nabbed from spiderwebs, flowers, and out of midair. Insects provide much-needed protein in addition to the energy they gain from flower nectar or sugar water feeders.

During the winter, they will increase visits to backyard feeders in search of energy, and can benefit greatly from readily available, unfrozen nectar. Adding a heater or incandescent bulb to your hummingbird feeder is a great way to both keep the nectar a liquid and give your hummingbirds some help conserving body heat.

At night, hummingbirds still have to find a roosting spot safe from wind, rain and snow. This could be in an evergreen, shrub, greenhouse, or even tucked in the corner of a window.

Once the spot is chosen, a hummingbird will enter the *torpor* state, slowing their metabolic rate and dropping their body temperature in order to conserve enough energy to wake up the next morning. During torpor, hummingbirds feet lock in place to keep them from falling off their perch while they are out. If you've ever spotted a hummingbird hanging upside from a perch, chances are they're in a torpor and will wake up just fine.

Though they can appear like they shouldn't be able to survive once the weather turns freezing, they're actually a lot tougher than they look.



K. Bosch

Hummingbird Feeder Heaters

Adaptable for most hummingbird feeders.

Plug-in heaters to keep your sugar water from freezing, giving hummingbirds a safe, accessible source of nectar. It also saves you from having to get up at dawn to put your thawed feeder back out!

Two styles available, the Hummer Hearth that works best with any flat-bottomed feeder, especially saucer-styles, and the three sizes of Warm Wings, that work best with bottle-style or saucer style feeders.

Starting at \$49.99 ea.



WHAT'S HAPPENING IN THE BACKYARD

BY KELSEY

Backyards are booming this fall, with plenty of birds hanging around and visiting backyard feeders.

Likely, this means that natural food sources aren't as abundant as they were last year, leading birds to stick closer to the supplementary sources of backyard feeders. Good news for us! More birds to watch.

Chestnut-backed Chickadees, who had mostly moved to higher elevations last year, are instead flocking around backyards and in nearby trees and shrubs.

Alongside them we have plenty of Dark-eyed Juncos, hopping around underneath the bird feeders with the occasional brave one flapping wildly as they hang off the suet feeder. They are starting to get the hang of it though, at least here at the store.



House Finches are gathering on the tube feeders and on Colin's suet feeder, and Bushtit flocks are covering the suet in gray-ish brown fluff before quickly retreating to the nearby evergreens and chittering as soon as they see any movement.

You may also be noticing the brilliant yellow of the American Goldfinch is no longer spotted at your backyard feeders, and think that they've all gone south for the winter.

Keep an eye out for their winter plumage, where the male's bright colour fades to a much duller gray-brown, though they keep the dark wings and lighter wingbars.

Pine Siskins do appear to have mostly flown the coop, and we'll likely see smaller numbers next year as they enter a low period in our area.

We've had reports of the first Steller's Jays coming to backyards. It's likely the juveniles, who move down first before being followed later by the more mature adults. Attract them to your yard by adding an open tray feeder with sunflower seeds or peanuts in the shell.

You should also be sure to keep your eyes and ears peeled for Yellow-rumped Warblers in their duller winter plumage, and the occasional other warbler that may end up stuck here for the winter. Warblers aren't likely to visit backyard feeders, but you may get an occasional straggler who didn't migrate in time visiting a suet feeder for a snack if you're lucky.

With the coming winter, keeping bird seed dry and accessible can be more of a struggle. Moving feeders under shelter, adding rain covers, or switching to seeds in the shell like black oil sunflower can help keep your bird seed from getting wet and causing issues.

We also recommend putting out less seed at a time as well as cleaning and refilling feeders more frequently to keep your seeds dry, fresh, and available for your backyard birds while limited wasted seeds.

Another thing to think about with the colder weather incoming is adding heaters to your backyard feeding station.

Hummingbird feeders can freeze in low temperatures, and adding a heater can keep them defrosted as well as keep you from having to switch them out every thirty minutes for an unfrozen one. It also gives your hummingbirds a warmer place to perch, if they need it.

Another heater that most people don't think about is for the bird baths. During the cold, plenty of natural water sources can freeze up and leave less secure options for backyard birds to have a drink and a bath.

If you have a concrete bird bath, it's recommended to add a heater to keep it from freezing or put it away for the winter, as water may seep into miniscule cracks and freeze, causing damage.



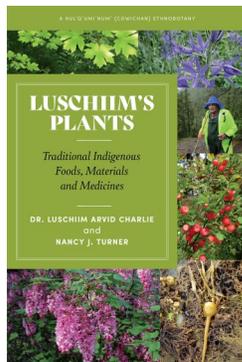
You can temporarily replace your concrete or glass bath with a cheaper plastic dish, and either add a plug in heater or replenish the water regularly with hot water to melt any encroaching ice. Not only does this give birds a safe place for a bath, but it also gives you entertainment all fall and winter long.

Non-migratory birds can also benefit from the addition of sheltered areas for them to roost. Keeping evergreens or adding a roosting box to your yard can be helpful in giving them a place to perch overnight, or to digest a meal.

LUSCHIIM'S PLANTS



"Respected Cowichan tribe elder and botanical expert Dr. Luschiim Arvid Charlie began his education in early childhood, learning from his great grandparents and extended community. *Luschiim's Plants* represents his dedication to the preservation of the Hul'q'umi'num' language and traditional knowledge of plants for future generations. This unprecedented collection of botanical and cultural information was compiled from field outings and interviews with internationally renowned ethnobiologist Nancy J. Turner." - from back cover



\$29.95 ea.

DID YOU KNOW?

Male American Goldfinch, and certain other birds, will molt from their bright breeding plumage into a duller, more energy-efficient colouration during the winter months? This helps conserve vital energy!

A HALLOWEEN CLASSIC

BY DAVE



FALSE WIDOWS

The look-a-like False Widow, or *Steadota nobilis*, is often confused for our native true Widow and will live in dark basements, garages, and crawl spaces. False Widows are a little smaller, and lack the characteristic hourglass of the true Widows.

False Widow bites can still cause localized pain and swelling, so try not to handle them roughly either if you must pick one up.

Latrodectus is a widely distributed genus of spiders, of which the North American species are commonly referred to as Black, Brown, or Red Widows, depending on the species. Worldwide, there are 34 known species, two of which can be found in Canada—the Western Black Widow, or *Latrodectus hespersus*, and Northern Black Widow, *Latrodectus variolus*.

Not surprisingly, the species found in British Columbia is the Western Black Widow. What some people may find surprising, though, is that Vancouver Island boasts a healthy population of Black Widow spiders. They can be found from Victoria to Campbell River, with the densest population being at Island View Beach, though these shy spiders can be very hard to just stumble across unless you're specifically looking for them.

The female Black Widows are around 15mm long, with a 38.1 to 50.8mm leg span. Males are much smaller, roughly 1/3 the size of the female. Females are the classic glossy black with a red, sometimes yellow and rarely white, hourglass on the underside of their abdomen.



The males aren't as glossy black, with some grey and brown. Male widows may have stripes, or lack the hourglass shape, and they sometimes have a red spot or two, or a red line on the top of their abdomen.

Preferring the hot outdoors, Widows are usually found amongst their strong webbing underneath logs and rocks or in crevices where they wait for hapless invertebrates to wander near enough to be caught, envenomated, dissolved from the inside, and sucked dry. Yum!

In an attempt to avoid this fate, male Widows will tap rhythmically on the females' web with his abdomen to test if she's hungry, and let her know he's there for some *bow-chicka-wow-wow*. This isn't always successful, though, hence both the common epithet Black Widow, and Salt N Pepa's original version of their classic song, "Let's Talk About Sexual Cannibalism."

Though the bites from a Black Widow are considered medically significant, they're often reluctant to bite at all. They prefer to run and hide to avoid wasting precious venom that takes both time and energy to produce.

Even when they do bite, it's such a small amount of venom that's injected, compared to the size of a human, that it is quickly diluted in our blood. Most healthy adults have not much to worry about, other than localized pain and swelling, and perhaps severe muscle cramping in the area, and nausea.

Despite the fears of many people, Black Widows tend not to set up shop inside our homes (phew!).



Project FeederWatch

Looking to do some citizen science? Just like bird watching and want an excuse to do it more?

Running from November 1st to April

30th, join Project FeederWatch and help scientists to get a better picture of winter bird distribution, measure changes in birds' winter ranges, get more accurate population maps, and learn if a species is at risk.

Simply sign up, watch birds, and submit your data!

Canadian participants can join by donating any amount to Birds Canada.

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- 1 Choose your bird watching spot
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THE VAMPIRE OF THE GALAPAGOS ISLANDS

BY IVY-LYNNE

October readily calls to mind a whole manner of spooky creatures but rarely, if ever, are birds included on that list. The only flying entity one expects to see Halloween night is a bat befitting Dracula, or an errant ghost. Yet, there's one rare bird in particular that would fit right in with this creepy crew.

Off the coast of Ecuador, on the Galapagos Islands, is a bird known as the Vampire Ground Finch. These birds are found on only two islands, Wolf and Darwin.

The Vampire Ground Finch has earned the title of vampire because of one trait they've developed over time; they drink bird blood.

Primarily, these birds drink the blood of Red, Masked, and Blue-footed Boobies. Their long, sharp beak acts as a fang as they peck at the base of where a boobie's feather has begun to grow, in order to draw blood.

Scientists believe that this results from an evolutionary behavioral shift between the boobies and these 'bloodthirsty' finches. In the past, the Vampire Ground Finch likely aided the boobies by pecking parasites off their backs. Eventually, they must have decided to adopt some parasitic tendencies of their own.

This development likely arose out of necessity. Both islands these finches call home are quite arid and dry, meaning fresh water sources can be scarce at times. As a way to get enough to drink, the Vampire Ground Finch has turned to blood, which can also be used to subsidize or supplement their diet.

Though the birds typically eat insects and seeds, if they find their food sources to be more limited, they can use booby blood as an extra source of nutrients.

You certainly can't accuse these birds of being picky, just peckish!



Beyond blood, insects, and seeds, Vampire Ground Finches will also steal booby eggs to feast on. Typically, the heist occurs right after the eggs have been laid. Once stolen, the Vampire Ground Finch will roll the egg into rocks, using their beak to pivot it, and pushing with their legs to crack it open. Once cracked, the finch drinks the liquid inside.

Scientists have found this foray into blood drinking has actually altered the genetic makeup of the Vampire Ground Finch. While most of Darwin's thirteen archipelago finches have very similar gut microbiomes, the Vampire Ground Finch's is teeming with bacteria not found among the others.

This bacterium is usually present amongst carnivorous birds and mammals. One study even discovered that the Vampire Ground Finch has a bacterium in common with the Vampire Bat. The bacterium in question helps animals process excessive levels of salt and iron, two chemical compounds found frequently in blood.

Their peculiar eating habits aren't the only thing interesting about these strange birds. Despite being the same species, the Vampire Finches on Wolf Island and Darwin Island have slight differences in their song. Though finches on both islands make a whistling sort of call, those on Wolf Island have a more melodious, lilting song while the finches on Darwin have a more 'buzzing' song.

Unfortunately, these interesting birds are not without threats. They're an endangered species and, ironically, one of the major threats they face is the Avian Vampire Fly. This parasitic botfly has wreaked havoc on the Vampire Ground Finch population, especially their young. The fly lays its eggs in the finches nests, and once the larvae are born they feed off the newly hatched chicks blood and tissue, often resulting in the death of the nestling.

Fortunately, solutions to save these birds are being examined and tested. One such solution is to introduce nesting material laced with a non-harmful insecticide, that can be used by the finches for their nests. The material won't harm the chicks, but should keep the harmful avian fly larvae from hatching in the nests.

While very few have had the opportunity to see them in person, these adaptable finches would certainly be a sight to behold. That being said, if you're ever planning to visit the Galapagos Islands, maybe pack a scarf, and a clove of garlic, just in case. There's no evidence these vampiric birds might turn their attention to human victims, but it's always better to be safe!

BIRD FOOD

Feed your birds what they love. Our bird seed and seed blends are specially chosen to appeal to our local Vancouver Island birds.

Attract everyone with our Gourmet blend or chipped sunflower, or help keep unwanted furry guests away using white millet.



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 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.

Bird Walks are not held during the summer months (July & August) but resume in early 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

October 13th, *Thanksgiving*: CLOSED

November 11th, *Remembrance Day*:

CLOSED

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BIRD SIGHTINGS

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

SEPT. 14TH

6 Sandhill Cranes & 50+ Greater White-fronted Geese at Grovehill Road, Qualicum.

Pectoral Sandpiper at Arrowsmith Golf Course.

SEPT. 21ST

3-5 Cranes near Horne Lake.

DELIVERY SCHEDULE FOR OCTOBER

North Nanaimo to the Comox Valley

October 8th and October 22nd

South Nanaimo to Duncan

October 1st and October 15

OCTOBER is

Sun	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat
			 S Raccoon Day		Butterfly & Hummingbird Day	Butterfly & Hummingbird Day
	World Habitat Day		 N			World Migratory Bird Day
			 S			
	Reptile Awareness Day		 N	24		Bat Week
Bat Week			 G	31		

Bat Appreciation Month

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](#)

