

**30**  
YEARS

Merry Christmas & Happy Holidays

Birding IN THE Backyard  
DECEMBER 2025



R. Hocken

## EMPEROR PENGUIN

BY KELSEY

Emperor Penguins live in colonies, scattered across the Antarctic's 'fast ice' (landlocked ice stuck between islands or grounded icebergs). The colonies can range from a few hundred penguins to around 20 thousand pairs. Some of the colonies are so large, the marks they leave on the tundra have been used to spot the colonies *from space!*

Emperor Penguins are also excellent divers. Though they usually stay between 150 and 250 meters deep, the deepest recorded dive was 565 meters below the surface. During a dive, the bird stays underwater for 3 to 6 minutes on average, with the longest dive recorded at 22 minutes. That's a big difference!

To keep them warm both in and out of the water, Emperor Penguins have excellent insulation. Their layers of scale-like feathers, paired with their proportionally small bills and flippers, help them conserve heat. Another way they retain heat is through their specially designed nasal chamber, which helps recapture heat that would otherwise be lost during their exhalation.

These penguins are even able to recycle their own body heat by transferring it back and forth between their veins and arteries, cooling the blood heading to their extremities and warming it as it heads towards their heart.

Even with all these adaptations, the main reason these penguins can survive their harsh native climate? Cuddling. Emperor Penguins are a non-territorial species, meaning they don't mind (prefer, even) to have other Emperor

Penguins nearby, often in giant huddles consisting of the entire colony.

This huddling instinct is especially important during the breeding season. Male penguins are responsible for all the incubating of the eggs, while the females head out to sea in search of food. Once the chicks hatch, the parents share raising duty with the female taking first shift as her partner goes in search of his first meal in a long time.

Adult Emperor Penguins eat roughly 2 to 3 kilograms of food a day. They usually choose smaller prey such as Antarctic silverfish, other small fish, Antarctic krill, and some smaller squid species. Small prey is easier to warm up to their internal temperature during digestion, and leeches less heat away in the process.

Right before breeding season, an adult penguin can up their food intake from 3 kg. to roughly 6kg. Our largest living penguin, Emperors top out around 40kg. pre-breeding season. They pack on extra weight before breeding in order to increase their survival chances, especially because they're the only animals that will breed during the Antarctic winter.

Emperor Penguins are considered a near threatened species, with the population expected to continue declining.



A. Fröhlich

# WHITE-THROATED SPARROW VS WHITE-CROWNED SPARROW

WHITE-THROATED (LEFT) AND WHITE-CROWNED (RIGHT)

**THE MALE WHITE-THROATED SPARROW** is a large, plump sparrow with a smallish bill and long, narrow tail. They're brown above and gray below. They have a bold facial pattern, including black and white stripes across the crown, a yellow spot between their eye and bill, and a white throat patch on their gray face and breast. Uncommon in our area, they're unlikely to visit feeders though they have been seen alongside White-crowned Sparrows.

**THE MALE WHITE-CROWNED SPARROW** is a large, grayish sparrow with a long tail. Their head may appear peaked, or smooth. They have bold black and white stripes across their head. White-crowned Sparrows are some of the most easily identified sparrows in North America, and can be attracted to backyard feeders.



WHITE-THROATED SPARROW  
—V. TAYLOR



WHITE-CROWNED SPARROW  
—R. HOCKEN

A. Morffew—Flickr



## CARDINALS? WE DON'T NEED NO STINKIN' CARDINALS!

BY DAVE

I'm bitter.

I'm bitter about a lot of things, but at this time of the year I'm *particularly* bitter about cardinals. You know, those beautiful, mid-sized, bright red (males, anyways. The ladies are far duller) birds that adorn so many holiday cards, wrapping paper, knick-knacks, mugs, and so forth?

I'm bitter about having these gorgeous animals rubbed in my face when there's no way I can enjoy them in person, stuck at home during our wet, chilly winters. It's simply unfair.

I say we band together. Start a movement. Oust the cardinal as the standard for holiday ornamentation.

We have birds in British Columbia. We even have winter birds. Let's choose one of *our* winter birds, and push them onto the east coasts.

How about the Steller's Jay? They're beautiful. They're bold. They're sassy. They'd be a great choice to put in winter scenes on cards and wrapping paper. Their gorgeous blue and black colouring would be perfect for ornaments.

And! Chestnut-backed Chickadees? They, too, are bold and brave. Plus they're cute, and will accept gifts of treats right out of your hand. They can easily represent those chestnut roasting on an open fire; perfect for the season.

Then, there's the Red-breasted Nuthatch. They've got red in the name, to go with the red of Christmas. They've got the nuts, like the classic Christmas ballet *The Nutcracker Suite*, and they're pushy like so many Christmas shoppers. Not to mention, they're also quite pretty.

So I vote for a holiday miracle. I vote for local birds to be brought front and center for the season.

Who's with me?

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# HOLY COLOURS, BATMAN

BY KELSEY

Have you ever wondered why sometimes the same species of bird is a different colour? Whether it's slight shade differences or a more varied change, it can be interesting to see!

The plumage colouring of birds is derived from two sources: colour pigments and feather structure.

The structure of the feather creates what's known as *structural colours*, which come into play when the feather's keratin layers interact with light. The keratin scatters and interferes with the light waves, creating white, blue, green, and iridescent colouration. If you've ever seen the oil-slick black of a European Starling, or the brilliant red gorget of the Anna's hummingbird, that's structural colouration at work.

Colour pigments are divided into three groups, *melanin*, *porphyrin*, and *carotenoids*. Melanin pigments are responsible for blacks, grays, browns and red browns, as well as dull yellow. Porphyrin results in greens, reds, and browns, while carotenoids are the cause of bright red, orange, yellow, and the occasional pinks and purples.

Carotenoid-derived pigments are among the most common and noticeable ornamental traits in animals, including wild birds. Despite this commonality, animals are unable to synthesize carotenoids themselves and instead rely on dietary sources to obtain it.

Carotenoids are produced *de novo*, or without obtaining any from the parent plants, by bacteria, fungi, algae, and higher plants (plants that can be planted).

Of hundreds of naturally available carotenoids, wild birds likely ingest only around a dozen or so. Among this dozen, the actual bioavailability of carotenoids is further reduced by the birds' ability to absorb and mobilize them through their body.

Some species, like the House Finch, are not only capable of absorbing and utilizing carotenoids, but can also metabolize the dietary carotenoids (usually yellow pigments like lutein and zeaxanthin) into derived carotenoids, giving them their signature red.



J. Morrison

Because certain colours are derived from outside sources, bird colouration can vary based on the availability of these sources. Flamingos are an excellent example of such. Flamingos are naturally gray, not pink! Their signature brilliant pink actually comes from their diet—especially brine shrimp, which are also known as sea monkeys.

Birds that have bright carotenoid-based plumages are usually frugivorous, meaning they eat primarily fruits. Due to the abundance of carotenoids in their chosen diet, these birds are also very likely to consume far more of the pigment than required for their colouration.

The full list of carotenoids that birds can absorb and use for pigmentation isn't clear. A study done with captive birds shows that they were able to absorb carotenoids outside those found in their natural diet. There's also been instances of captive flamingoes being fed extra carotenoids to increase their pink pigmentation, or less to decrease it—without harming the birds.

As well as being useful for plumage colouration, carotenoids are also thought to be a useful and relevant molecule for processes like immunocompetence and vitamin A synthesis, as well as being an antioxidant.

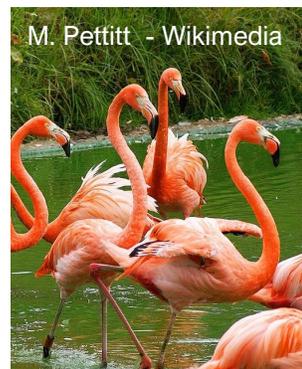
Research is also finding that carotenoids likely have a positive effect on birds' colour vision, and ability to reproduce.

Carotenoids are therefore not only important for colouration but also for body maintenance. When carotenoids are deposited in feathers for use as ornamentation, they aren't available to be moved to other, more important, bodily functions.

Though previously it was thought that carotenoid-based plumage would be a decent indication of a birds' quality as a mate due to the carotenoids they 'waste' on ornamental purposes, recent research has suggested the correlation isn't as important as believed. More research is required for a more concrete answer.

## References

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M. Pettitt - Wikimedia

## GIFT IDEAS FOR YOUR FAVOURITE PEOPLE



mug & gift box



wall-mount woodpecker



throw blankets

## DID YOU KNOW?

Flamingos get their signature pink colour due to a carotenoid called *beta-carotene*, which is found in the algae, brine shrimp (also known as sea monkeys!) and other tiny organisms they eat?





R. Hocken

# A CORVID'S CHRISTMAS

BY IVY-LYNNE

'Tis the season for gift-giving, and while shopping for or creating special gifts for those you care about may appear to be a uniquely human activity, many birds have been known to participate in this holiday ritual as well.

The most well-known birds that have a habit of leaving quirky gifts behind for humans are all corvids; Magpies, crows, ravens, etc. have all been known to leave 'gifts'. There's been plenty of personal accounts on these wildlife gift exchanges. Most of the gifts left behind are small, and seemingly innocuous. One man, Stuart Dahlquist, spoke about how he had been feeding a murder of crows for around four years when they seemingly left behind a token of their appreciation on his doorstep.

Upon leaving the house one morning, he stumbled across a pine needle, threaded through a shiny soda tab. This wouldn't be the only one he would receive from the crows, and Stuart quickly came to believe that these were being left behind as some sort of thank you. The idea might appear a bit silly. Humans after all, do have a habit of ascribing what are typically human traits onto wildlife, but the idea that birds can leave behind gifts for humans is not as far-fetched as it might seem.

If any bird was going to leave gifts behind, it would be a crow or other member of the corvid family. These birds are known to be remarkably intelligent, after all. Some research has even indicated that crows have the mental capacity of a seven-year-old. Professor John Marzluff, who teaches at the University of Washington's Aviation Conservation Lab, has stated that crows are comparable to primates, at least in terms of mental capabilities.

A more important indication of a crow's intelligence, relevant to their ability to leave behind gifts, is that crows can recognize faces. It's thought that crows are more likely to leave gift little trinkets to humans they have become familiar with. Crows also appear to have a rather impressive memory, so if you're kind to the crows, like Stuart Dahlquist was, they will be more inclined to leave behind a present on your doorstep.

So, this holiday season, while you're out buying gifts for your loved ones, don't skimp on feeding the crows. If you feed them, you'll be all the more likely to receive a gift from your new feathered friend!



D. Hofmann—Flickr

## LOOKING TO FEED YOUR LOCAL CORVIDS?

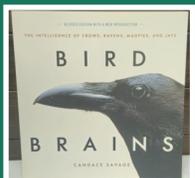
- ◆ Unsalted & unroasted nuts, including peanuts, walnuts and pecans.
- ◆ Cooked meats like chicken or beef.
- ◆ Plain hardboiled eggs.
- ◆ Various berries including cherries, apples (with the seeds removed), and grapes.
- ◆ Vegetables such as corn, pumpkin, and small amounts of lettuce and peppers.
- ◆ Insects like mealworms and crickets.

Offering small treats on a consistent basis can lead to the befriending of crows. You don't need to put out a ton, just a little bit every day.

Pair the feeding with a recognizable sound, behaviour, or outfit to make it even easier for your local crows to know when it's snack time, and who's feeding them.

## Crazy About Corvids?

Check out our selection of corvid-themed mugs, coasters, art prints, water bottles, and books!



# CHRISTMAS FOR THE BIRDS

BY COLIN

Tis the season, as Christmas will soon be here. It is a time of joy and celebrating, but with barely any time left until Christmas, the joy is sometimes lost.

When trying to figure out a gift for that person on your list who already enjoys the birds or someone who would enjoy the fun of the birds in the backyard, here are a few ideas to help you finish your shopping.

This year, think about what the birds would like for Christmas, and you may find many new gift ideas. What might a Chestnut-backed Chickadee appreciate under the tree? Starting off, a big bag of black oil sunflower seeds!



Then you're going to need something to put the seeds in, like a new cedar bird feeder with a screen mesh base and large roof to help keep the seeds dry and sheltered. You can also add a high energy suet and suet feeder to give your birds plenty of the energy they need this time of the year.

Already got all the feeding equipment? How about somewhere warm to stay, such as a nest box that the birds can use as a roost box in the winter and also be used to raise a family in the summer time.

Water is also an important part of survival. During the winter, it can be hard to find a fresh, unfrozen water supply. Providing a birdbath with fresh water will not only help the birds but also provide you with many hours of entertainment. To keep the water from freezing use a maintenance free, thermostatically controlled bird bath heater, or periodically refill with hot water.

Habitat is very important to all animals. Providing trees and shrubs will offer the bird's shelter as well as food. Having the right habitat when others are clearing it away will encourage the birds to your backyard and establishing a natural ecosystem.

After the mad rush of shopping it is time for you to relax. This can easily be accomplished by sitting back in your favorite chair and watch the birds in your backyard. Watching the birds is known to help relax a person and ease their blood pressure. So when the Christmas shopping gets a little to hectic, sit back, enjoy and rejuvenate yourself by watching your feeders and enjoying this festive season.

Once everything is done, how about a little Christmas for the birds with a tree decorated for them. You can repurpose your Christmas tree after the fact, or choose a tree outside to decorate.

To decorate your bird-y Christmas tree, start by hanging seed bells of different seeds types, to attract a variety of backyard birds.

You can also fill an onion sack with nuts like peanut halves, black oil sunflower seeds, or even suet. Got pine trees? Use a large cone, fill it with natural peanut butter, either smooth or chunky. Once the cone is filled roll it in birdseed until covered. The birdseed helps the birds digest the peanut butter, which is nice and high in protein to help them out during the winter.

For birds such as the American Robins cut an apple or other fruits into halves or quarters and place throughout the tree near branches for the Robins to perch on. You can also grate some suet to leave in an open tray for ground feeding birds.

Season's Tweetings!



**MARS**  
WILDLIFE RESCUE CENTRE



## DONATION GIFTS

Did you know that you can symbolically adopt a wild animal through the North Island Recovery Center? The animals will stay in care at the center, and your adoption fee helps provide food, medical care, and toys. NIWRA also encourages adoptive parents to visit regularly!



Other options for meaningful gifts include a MARS membership, which helps care for injured, ill and orphaned wildlife around the Comox Valley.



Or donate in your giftees name to local organizations such as the Nanaimo & Area Land Trust.

# BIRD WALKS

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

**Bird walks are on pause for the winter months and will resume in February with exact dates TBD.**

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.

Bird walks are not held during the summer months (July & August) but resume in early September. They also go on pause during the winter (December & January), resuming in early February.

There's no charge for our bird walks, and they are designed to conclude before lunch, averaging roughly 2 hours.

All experience levels welcome.

Bring your own binoculars when possible, and decent walking shoes 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

December 24th, *Christmas Eve*: 9:30-4:00

December 25th, *Christmas Day*: CLOSED

December 26th, *Boxing Day*: CLOSED

January 1st, *New Years Day*: CLOSED

## CONTACT US

6314 Metral Drive, Nanaimo, BC

250-390-3669

Toll Free 1-888-808-BIRD [2473]

[info@thebackyard.ca](mailto:info@thebackyard.ca)

[thebackyard.ca](http://thebackyard.ca)

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# BIRD SIGHTINGS

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

### NOVEMBER 12

*White-throated Sparrow & Mourning Dove* at Maxi Road.

### NOVEMBER 13

*Bullocks Oriole* at Yambury & Nassan Cresc. Qualicum.

### NOVEMBER 25

*Snowy Owl* in a backyard on Gabriola Island.

### DECEMBER 2

*Blue Jay* in a backyard on Gabriola Island.

### DECEMBER 3

*Great Horned Owl* off Departure Bay Road.

## DELIVERY SCHEDULE FOR DECEMBER

### North Nanaimo to the Comox Valley

December 10th and December 23rd

### South Nanaimo to Duncan

December 3rd and December 17th

DECEMBER						
Sun	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat
	1		 S			
			 N			
Christmas Bird Count Parksville			 S			Christmas Bird Count Nanose
Christmas Bird Count Comox		 N	24  Reduced Hours TBD	25 <b>CLOSED</b>	26 <b>CLOSED</b>	Christmas Bird Count Nanaimo
Christmas Bird Count Campbell River		 G		1 <b>CLOSED</b>		

## 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](#)



*Season's Tweetings*  
from all of us at The Backyard!

