



R. Hocken

Birding IN THE Backyard

JANUARY 2026

SPOTTED TOWHEE

BY KELSEY

Spotted Towhees are a fairly common backyard bird, often spotted amongst other sparrows on the ground. Keep an eye out for their hopping movements, and watch at open feeders to see them chase out smaller birds and monopolize the seed supply.

Towhees are large, chunky sparrows with thick, pointed bills and short necks. Their tail is long and rounded, and if you spot one on the ground they'll often tilt their tail slightly up, flicking it as they hop around.

Their belly is white, with rufous-orange sides. While the males are a dark, jet black on their head, throat, back and tail, their female counterparts are a more grayish brown. Both male and female towhees have white spotting across their back and wings. During flight, watch the tail for white corners.

Spotted Towhees hop around under dense shrubs, scratching at the leaf litter in search of food. If you watch, you'll note their two-foot, back-scratching hop. They utilize this 'double-scratching' to uncover food sources like small invertebrates and seeds hiding in the leaf litter, which are then pounced on.

Though they can fly longer distances, towhees are more likely to make short flights between bits of cover.

Towhees like to nest on or near the ground, choosing open areas hiding inside thickets. Towhee nests are built by the female using a framework of leaves, stems, and bark strips filled with grasses, pine needles, and hair.

Spotted Towhees are omnivores. During nesting, they go primarily for insects like beetles, crickets, caterpillars, and moths, as well as other leaf-litter arthropods like millipedes and spiders. During the fall and winter, they're more likely to go for the more available acorns, berries, and seeds, including those at backyard feeders.

These chunky sparrows like open, shrub-filled habitats with nice, thick undergrowth. They're also quite at home in your backyard, and can enjoy open tray feeders filled with white millet or sunflower seeds.

In the past, Spotted Towhees were considered the same species as Eastern Towhees under the name Rufous-sided Towhee. Though both are still present in the Great Plains, where they occasionally interbreed, the two species were split apart into eastern and western populations and eventually evolved into independent species.



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EASTERN TOWHEE VS SPOTTED TOWHEE

EASTERN TOWHEE (LEFT) AND SPOTTED TOWHEE (RIGHT)

THE SPOTTED TOWHEE is a large member of the sparrow family. They have a thick bill and long, dark tail. Their back and head are black, with rufous-orange sides and a white belly. Towhees also have white spotting across their back and wings, and distinctive red eyes.



SPOTTED TOWHEE
—R. HOCKEN

THE EASTERN TOWHEE is a large, chunky sparrow with a thick, triangular bill and long, rounded tail. They have a black back and head paired with rufous-orange sides and a white belly. Wings and back lack the Spotted Towhee's white spotting.



EASTERN TOWHEE
—A. HUETT (FLICKR)

Eastern and Spotted Towhees were previously considered the same species, under the name Rufous-sided Towhee.

IT'S JANUARY...GROSS!

BY DAVE



It's dark, cold and wet; but, there's still stuff that you can do. No, I don't mean hole up under blankets wishing winter away as you down copious amounts of hot bevs and binge serial killer documentaries. I'm talking about getting out into your garden and doing some light work.

If your compost is ready, now's a good time to top dress your beds. The worms and other crawlies will mix much of it in, eat and poop it out, prepping the soil for the new growth of plant to come. If your compost isn't ready, give it a good turn to oxygenate the pile which promotes aerobic breakdown of the waste materials.

Start some seeds the last week of the month so they're ready to be planted come spring. Fibrous begonia, coleus, cleome, petunia, primula, snapdragon, squash, parsley, mint, leaks, tomatoes, peppers, chard, kale, etc.

Do your fruit tree pruning, and remember to clean your tools before cutting each tree to prevent spreading disease. Take off any water sprouts, branches that are growing straight up, dead branches, branches that are rub or cross over each other, and branches that are growing inward.

Prune your berry bushes. As with your trees, be sure to clean your tools. Remove stalks that are three years old or older, this rejuvenates the whole shrub. Like the trees, remove dead, crossing, and inward growing branches.

If you use dormant spray, now's the time to watch for a stretch of dry weather. It's important to spray before the trees' leaves start popping, and that there won't be any rain to wash the spray from the branches. Dormant spray degrades quickly and will need a second application a couple weeks later.

The spray works against some fungus infections and certain insect pests, such as codling moth. Left unchecked, codling moth can decimate an entire tree's crop of apples, so taking the time to give a little squirty squirt to your trees is well worth not losing your fruit, or eating mouthfuls of maggots.

Finally, your work is done. Now you can get back to the important stuff, like learning how the Phantom of Texarkana managed to avoid identification after all these years.

Open Tray Feeders

Ground feeding birds like the Spotted Towhee enjoy nice, open trays that they can easily access and feed from.



Attract these birds to small and large ground trays, hanging trays, and covered open trays using white millet, chipped sunflower, or our Ground Blend seeds.

Ground trays starting at \$29.99 ea.



GET BOGGED DOWN

BY DAVE

Carnivorous plants have become readily available in recent years; often being sold as emergent plants in the pond sections at nurseries. Having kept and propagated many for some time, I recommend not keeping them directly in a pond; but in an adjacent, stand alone bog garden, or, better yet, a bog pot.

A full bog can take up quite a bit of space, so bog pots are often the better choice for people. I started with single species bog pots that I maintained for years before switching to a mixed species bog until moving, which forced me back to single species pots. Then, when I moved to Nanaimo I excitedly build a large mixed bog.

For seven years I neglected the bog as its size was overwhelming for me; I'm a very lazy gardener. The sphagnum overgrew my 35 year old clumps of Venus flytraps and sundews, and seriously hindered the growth of my various Sarracenia. So, I'm back to single species containers. It's so much easier for me.

I like using sturdy, light coloured pot sleeves as bog planters as they do not have bottom drainage holes. This is important when planting a bog as you want water retention, to mimic a wetland. You can, in a pinch, adapt a conventional pot by plugging the drainage holes using a sealant glue, but be sure to choose one that does not contain an anti-fungal agent. "LePage PL Premium" construction glue is my go to as it is non-reactive once cured.

If you have a nice ceramic pot you can use an old tarp as a liner, cutting the tarp roughly 15cm shorter than the depth of the pot.

Just because you don't want drainage to happen from the bottom doesn't mean you don't want drainage at all, though. What I do for this is drill, or melt, several 1cm holes approximately 15cm from the top of the pot. This allows the pot to hold a large reserve of water while keeping the crowns of the plants safely above the water line.

Carnivorous plants are carnivorous because they grow in nutrient poor conditions. As there is nothing but root anchorage in their habitat, all of the nutrition they need they attract and "catch" in the form of (mostly) invertebrates. Because of this, it's important to use a soilless substrate, such as peat moss or coconut coir.

There is much debate as to what is more sustainable, but I won't get into that here. Just be aware that coir is often processed with brine, which can damage your plants. Coir is closer to neutral PH; but, bog plants need an acidic medium, something to also keep in mind when making that decision. If you choose coir you can soak and drain it several times to remove any residual salt that may be present.



I like to add 1/3 small chip fir bark, sold as orchid bark, when I put together a bog pot. This de-densifies the medium, making it easier for roots to spread out. I do not add orchid bark to larger bogs, I can't be bothered, and it's expensive.

I have tried the recommendation of adding sand and perlite to the medium. I simply don't like it; the sand adds too much weight, I found little benefit from the perlite, and (like Madonna feels about hydrangeas) I loath the look of perlite on the surface of the substrate.

Before planting, you'll need to soak the substrate. Because both dry sphagnum and coir repel water at first, it's easier to do the soaking in a separate container such as a large storage tub rather than trying to maneuver it all in the final planter as it floats and fights you before it finally sucks up the water and sinks.

Where I am, in central Nanaimo, the water is fine for bog plants, as there is low mineral content. If you are in an area such as Lantzville, you are better off using rain water, or distilled water, otherwise the mineral buildup will end up burning the roots of your plants. Keep this in mind when choosing the size of planter.

Add the waterlogged substrate to your planter; you want it sloppy, soggy wet. Gently wash the roots clear of the soil your plant was sold with, and plant up your pot. Place the pot in a full sun area, and enjoy.

Hint - if you add clumps of dried long fibre sphagnum to the upper stratum of the planter you are likely to have a lovely green shag carpet grow within a couple of years. Beware, though, to keep it in check, or like what happened to me, it'll swamp over your carnivores.

"Canadian Carnivores" in Surrey, and "Carnivorous Plant Store" on Saltspring Island are great sources for a variety of carnivorous plants. They also sell live sphagnum moss, and ship to your door.



CHOOSE COMFORT



DID YOU KNOW?

Natural bogs are carbon sinks! This means they store a lot of carbon, keeping it out of the air, due to the dead plants constantly accumulating within them.



RARE BIRDS OF 2025

BY KELSEY



Taiga Flycatcher: H. Haka—Flickr

RARE BIRD SIGHTINGS

Seen a rare bird? Report it!

[BC Rare Bird Report Form \(Field Ornithologists\)](#)



[BC Rare Bird Alert \(Jeremy Gatten\)](#)



Want to know what rare birds are being seen?
Check these out!

[eBird Rare Bird Alerts \(BC\)](#)



[BC Rare Bird Alert \(Vancouver Island\)](#)



[BC Rare Birds Facebook Page](#)



TUFTED DUCK

December of 2024 to March of 2025 at the Duncan Sewage Lagoons.

NORTHERN MOCKINGBIRD

January to March in Tofino.

SAGE THRASHER

Late March at the Nanaimo River Estuary.

WESTERN BLUEBIRD

Late March in Saanich.

SWAINSON'S HAWK

Early May over Panama Flats in Victoria

HORNED PUFFIN

Mid-May on Sartine Island

SCISSOR-TAILED FLYCATCHER

Late May Schooner's Cove Beach in Tofino

MAGNIFICENT FRIGATEBIRD

Late May flying past Staines Point and Greater Trail Island, Victoria.

HOODED ORIOLE

Early June in Tofino.

3x EASTERN PHOEBE x BLACK PHOEBE HYBRIDS (*first breeding record in Canada*)

Late June to early August in Saanich.

ACORN WOODPECKER

Late June to late August in Victoria.

BOBOLINK

Late August in Saanichton

LEWIS'S WOODPECKER

Late September over Uplands Park, Victoria

SUMMER Tanager

Late September to early October on Sonora Island

LOGGERHEAD SHRIKE

Early October along Cox Road, Courtenay

BLUE JAY

Early October on Gabriola Island

WHITE-TAILED PTARMIGAN

Mid-November on Gabriola Island

RUFOUS HUMMINGBIRD

Late December in Victoria

BOHEMIAN WAXWING

Late December in Cumberland

TAIGA FLYCATCHER (*first recorded in Canada*)

Late December to early January around Sunset Beach Park, Vancouver

Binocular Set

Includes:

- ◆ VEO HD IV Binoculars with protective case, neck strap, and lens covers
- ◆ VEO Optic Guard Deluxe chest harness
- ◆ Digiscoping Adaptor
- ◆ Tripod Binocular Adaptor



Everything you need to get started!

\$699.99



HOW BEES SURVIVE WINTER

BY IVY-LYNNE

When winter arrives, many are left wondering what happened to our buzzing friends who bothered us at picnics and playgrounds during the spring and summer.

Some may believe that bees hibernate during the winter, or simply die off, but neither is entirely true. In reality, a bee's life during winter is much more complex than one might think, and depends on the species.

For starters, the honeybees we see in the spring and summer are not the same bees hunkered in their hives for the winter. Bees are usually boiled down to three primary castes: drones, workers and queen. But these honeybees, laid in the fall by their queen, are known simply as 'winter bees.'

These winter bees are recognized by Melittologists (people who study bees) as outside of the typical caste system associated with bees. What sets winter bees apart is the diet they are fed as larvae, and their lifespan.

Unlike other bees, winter bees are fed a pollen scarce diet, which encourages them to develop an extra 'fat body;' special insect tissue that regulates their metabolism and produces *vitellogenin*.

Vitellogenin is a substance that enhances a bee's immune system, which allows the winter bees to live for six months, rather than the six weeks a summer-born honeybee usually would.

Before winter sets in, these bees still have to prepare. Other members of the *Hymenoptera* order, including wasps, die off in large swathes during the winter for one predominant reason; they don't have enough food to sustain them during the long, cold, winter months.

As for honeybees, they make sure that before the temperature drops below ten degrees, they have a stockpile of honey at the ready. However, not all members of the hive, no matter how prepared, will be able to sequester in the hive for the winter and make it to spring.

Drones, or what we'd refer to as male bees, will die off before winter sets in.

Once the cold comes, it's imperative that all surviving bees, male or female, don't spend much time flying around. Low temperatures are extremely dangerous for them.

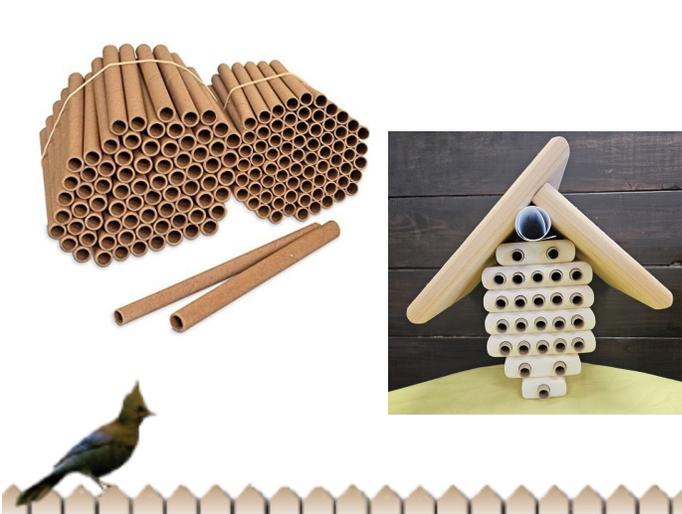
Though bees in the winter will typically remain in their hive, they may travel short distances to relieve themselves of waste. If they somehow lose their way back to the hive, or the weather takes a turn for the worst, the bee will effectively become paralyzed because of the cold.

Their wings and muscles will seize up, and unless the weather warms or someone somehow escorts them safely back to their hive, they will succumb to the weather and die.

For all those bees that do make it inside the hive and don't make any unfortunate, fatal outings, they will join what is the key component of winter survival for the honeybee; the cluster. To conserve body heat, all the bees, with the queen and her brood in the center, will cluster around one another.

The worker bees will make up the outside layer of the cluster, shivering and occasionally switching places with one another to try and ensure everyone stays warm. Ideally, a cluster within a honey bee colony can maintain a temperature of ninety-two degrees.

To sustain themselves, the cluster will crawl and climb around the nest to reach their honey reserves. For the majority of the winter, until temperatures reach a reasonable degree of warmth, around 15°C, the honeybees will stay clustered in their hive, ready and eager for the coming spring.



MASON BEE SUPPLIES

From single use tubes to reusable blocks in a variety of mason bee condos, we have what you need to get started with mason bees.

Cocoons are also available, starting mid-February. Call ahead to request a box set aside for you!



BIRD WALKS

Bird walks are on Sundays (Nanaimo) and Tuesdays (Parksville). Locations and cancellations are posted to 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

February 16th, *Family Day*: CLOSED

CONTACT US

6314 Metral Drive, Nanaimo, BC
250-390-3669
Toll Free 1-888-808-BIRD [2473]

info@thebackyard.ca
thebackyard.ca
thebirdstore.blogspot.com

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BIRD SIGHTINGS

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

DECEMBER 26TH

Turkey Vulture over Piper's Lagoon.

JANUARY 3RD

Red-breasted Sapsucker at the corner of Uplands & Sealion Place.

JANUARY 9TH

Taiga Flycatcher at Sunset Beach Park, Vancouver.

DELIVERY SCHEDULE FOR JANUARY

North Nanaimo to the Comox Valley

January 14th and January 29th

South Nanaimo to Duncan

January 7th and January 21st

JANUARY

Sun	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat
				CLOSED		
	National Bird Day		S			Save the Eagles Day
			N			
		Penguin Awareness Day	Squirrel Appreciation	S		
				N	G	

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](#)

