FOCUS ON CITIZEN SCIENCE • VOLUME 16

Winter Bird Highlights

FROM PROJECT FEEDERWATCH 2019–20

The Cornell Lab of Ornithology

BIRDS CANADA
OISEAUX CANADA

We Extended the Season

For the first time in 33 years, we extended the Project FeederWatch season through the end of April. We wanted to give participants a few extra weeks of FeederWatching, hoping that attending to birds would provide some respite during the early weeks of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic has taken, and continues to take, a terrible toll, but one bright spot of staying home and social distancing is the opportunity for people to spend more time observing nature around their homes. Participants submitted more counts and observed more birds last season than ever before—and by a substantial margin, even if we exclude the counts submitted during the extended weeks of the season! Just during the regular portion of last season, FeederWatchers submitted more than 172,000 checklists, a jump of more than 12,000 checklists from the season before. If we include the season extension, that brings us up to over 184,000 checklists—a record year by far. FeederWatch submissions have been increasing every year, but typically by much smaller margins. The counts submitted during the extended weeks provided a unique look at migratory birds visiting backyards. Read about what we learned from these data on page 6.

2019–20 FeederWatch season statistics

25,679 PARTICIPANTS
184,676 CHECKLISTS • 7,551,144 BIRDS

Cover: Dark-eyed Junco by Gary Mueller.
Below: The extended season meant that some participants observed fledglings during the FeederWatch season, like this Carolina Wren that fledged from a wren box on Harriet Neill's front porch in Tell City, Indiana, in late April.

Focus on Citizen Science is a publication highlighting contributions of citizen scientists. This issue, *Winter Bird Highlights 2020*, is brought to you by Project FeederWatch, a research and education project of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and Birds Canada. Project FeederWatch is made possible by the efforts and support of thousands of citizen scientists. Thank you!

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Join Project FeederWatch!

Anyone in the U.S. and Canada with an interest in birds is welcome to join. Help monitor winter bird populations while you learn about the birds in your neighborhood. To join, contact the FeederWatch office in your country.

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Why Are House Sparrows Vanishing from U.S. Cities?

BY LIAM BERIGAN, CORNELL UNIVERSITY CLASS OF 2017

The House Sparrow, which originated in Eurasia and followed settlers to every continent except Antarctica, has always benefited from proximity to humans. By forgoing natural food sources to forage on waste grain and city scraps, the House Sparrow has become one of the most abundant bird species in cities and agricultural areas across the world.

Despite their worldwide spread, this once-thriving species is not immune to declines. During the past few decades, the House Sparrow has undergone a mysterious decline in its native range in Europe, prompting alarm from scientists and its inclusion on the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds' Red List in the United Kingdom. The House Sparrow has also been included in a recent list of declining North American bird species[1], and much like in Europe, we don't have a clear understanding of the cause of their decline.

Project Feederwatch provides a unique opportunity to investigate the causes of the North American House Sparrow decline because FeederWatchers report from a range of habitats and a range of backyard circumstances. We investigated two questions about House Sparrow declines: 1) Are they declining more severely in urban or rural landscapes? 2) Are they declining more severely in yards with *Accipters* (Sharp-shinned or Cooper's Hawks)? Thanks to the meticulous nature by which FeederWatchers count their birds, we learned the answers to both.

Project FeederWatch data confirmed that House Sparrows declined significantly in North America (22% decline in mean flock size from 1995 to 2016) and showed that the decline was almost entirely in urban and suburban areas. In rural areas, House Sparrow populations remained relatively stable over the 21-year period. So why are these sparrows declining in urban habitats? Is it because hawks are moving into urban areas and depredating sparrows more than in the past? Well, not exactly; we were surprised to learn that House Sparrow declines weren't greater at sites with Sharp-shinned or Cooper's Hawks, suggesting that those avian predators aren't directly causing the declines.

We are left to wonder why urban areas in North America are becoming less hospitable to House Sparrows. If not because of hawks, perhaps other predators such as feral cats are causing the decline. Feral cats have been estimated to kill 1–4 billion birds in the U.S. annually[2], and House Sparrows are surely among those mortalities. Alternatively, perhaps House Sparrows, which depend on insects to feed their young, are finding fewer insects in urban greenspaces. A study in Britain found that increased urbanization results in the loss of greenspaces and correlates with House Sparrow declines[3]. Another study in Britain found that Great Tits nesting in urban areas suffered from limited insect abundance, but rural pairs did not[4]. These findings are a wake-up call and point to the importance of creating insect-friendly yards; everyone can help birds by eliminating pesticides and herbicides from their yard maintenance routines.

House Sparrows are a controversial species in North America because of their non-native status and their tendency to crowd out other birds in nest boxes and at feeders. However, their decline should still prompt concern. If a species that has historically thrived in contact with humans can no longer survive in cities, other bird species may be having similar problems. Two of the potential causes for House Sparrow decline—feral cats and the loss of urban greenspace—can equally affect native species. We hope that a dialogue about House Sparrow declines can help us better understand the impact of humans on other urban birds and lead to solutions that benefit not just House Sparrows but any species that lives in close contact with people.

[1]Rosenberg, K.V., Dokter, A.M., Blancher, P.J., Sauer, J.R., Smith, A.C., Smith, P.A., Stanton, J.C., Panjabi, A., Helft, L., Parr, M., and Marra, P.P. (2019). Decline of the North American avifauna. *Science*, 366:120–124.

[2]Loss, S.R., Will, T., and Marra, P.P. (2013). The impact of free-ranging domestic cats on wildlife of the United States. *Nature Communications*, 4:1396.

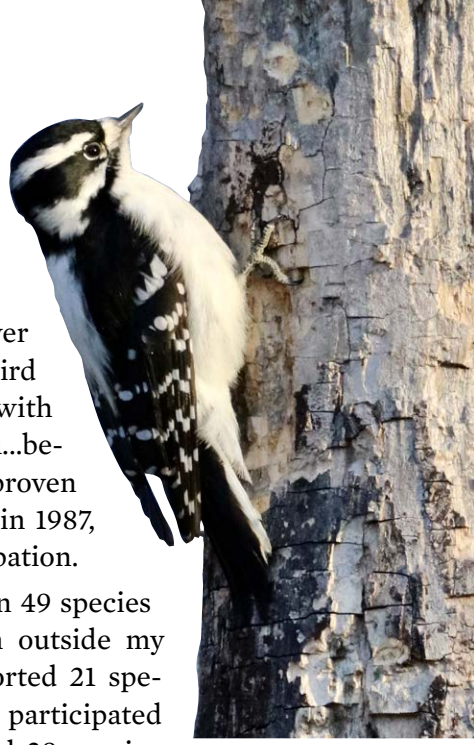
[3]Chamberlain, D.E., Toms, M.P., Cleary-McHarg, R., and Banks, A.N. (2007). House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) habitat use in urbanized landscapes. *Journal of Ornithology*, 148:453–462.

[4]Derryberry, E.P., and Coomes, C.M. (2020). Providing urban birds nutritious food to feed chicks reduces urban versus rural breeding success disparities. *Journal of Animal Ecology*, 89:1546-1548.

House Sparrow by Jean Oedewaldt

What 20 Years of FeederWatching Reveals

BY THOMAS V. LERCZAK, FEEDERWATCH PARTICIPANT, AND ANNE MARIE JOHNSON, CORNELL LAB OF ORNITHOLOGY



Downy Woodpecker by Denise Chambers

Since 2000, Thomas V. Lerczak has been FeederWatching in Havana, Illinois. In 2010, he wrote an article about 10 years of FeederWatching for the *Illinois Audubon* magazine, and last year he wrote a follow-up summary about 20 years of FeederWatching for his blog.

Lerczak's dataset will end at 20 years because he moved to a new home, but he looks forward to starting again! We share excerpts from his blog, The River Landing (**theriverlanding.typepad.com**), that show what long-term FeederWatching can reveal about your yard, such as the increase in bird diversity over time that can be seen in Lerczak's data.

Excerpts from The River Landing

In the article I wrote 10 years ago, I explained my rationale to start FeederWatching as follows:

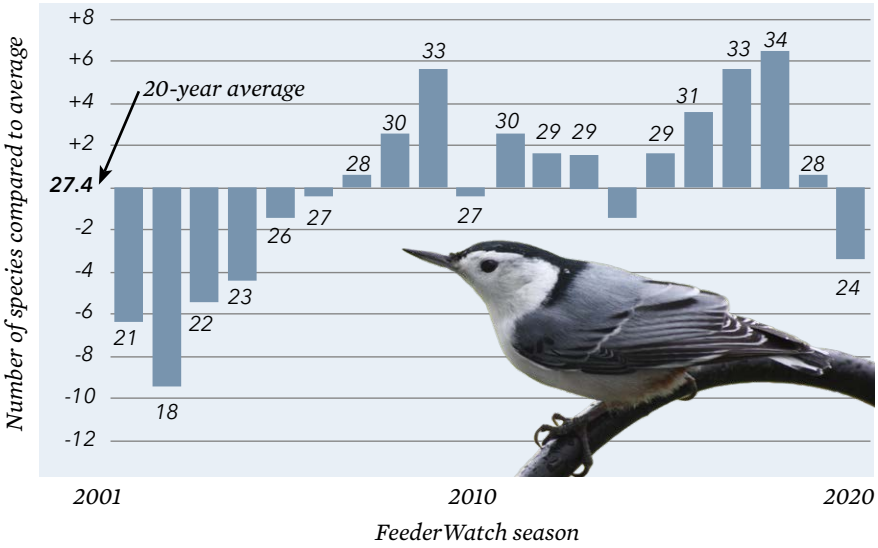
> In 1999, I had finally purchased my first home on about 3.5 acres in the sand hills east of Havana, Illinois. I always thought that if I ever became rooted, I would begin a long-term ecological study of one place in an attempt to gain insight into how and why changes occur in nature, especially within bird communities, over time. For my long-term bird study, I chose to work with Project FeederWatch...because this project has a proven track record, beginning in 1987, with widespread participation.

Over the years I have seen 49 species at my FeederWatch station outside my living room window. I reported 21 species during the first year I participated (2000–01 season) and added 28 species to my cumulative list over time. Eleven species were observed during every year of the project: Downy Woodpecker, Blue Jay, Black-capped Chickadee, White-breasted Nuthatch, European Starling, House Sparrow, Eurasian Tree Sparrow, House Finch, American Goldfinch, Dark-eyed Junco, and Northern Cardinal. I observed Black-capped Chickadee and Northern Cardinal during each of the 200 count periods.

The diversity of species at my feeders increased as I improved the habitat of my site. As I noted in my 2010 article, when I first moved into my new home, there were several large trees near the house and dense trees and shrubs around the perimeter, but most of the land was a closely mowed lawn. Birds had to fly over wide expanses of open area to reach the feeders from the rural countryside beyond my property. After a few years of minimal mowing, trees and shrubs began to grow near the feeders, soon providing cover from predators and branches for perching near the feeders. The average number of species I observed per count season over 20 years was 27.4, with my counts during the early years falling below that average and most later counts above the average (see graph).

This 20-year project gave me a great sense of satisfaction and insight into the complexities of nature. I look forward to the insights that the next 20 years of FeederWatching brings.

Number of species reported over time compared to average



White-breasted Nuthatch by Diane Murray

The number of species reported by Thomas over time compared to his 20-year average. The diversity of species increased as the diversity of his habitat increased.

Why Only Count the Most Seen at Once?

BY HOLLY FAULKNER, CORNELL LAB OF ORNITHOLOGY

Black-capped Chickadee by Shirley Guinn

You've just sat down in your living room under a cozy blanket with a steaming mug of fresh coffee to begin your FeederWatch count. You watch for an hour as chickadees race back and forth to your feeder from deep inside spruce trees just outside of view. You know there are probably several birds darting around in the branches, but they only come into view one at a time. How do you record these multiple visits in your count?

While it's tempting to add up every visit by the chickadees, the FeederWatch protocol calls for reporting only the highest number of each species seen simultaneously. Why is that? It is because the protocol is designed to prevent you from counting the same bird more than once. If you counted every visit to your feeders, you would report more individuals than you actually have, because some birds—especially species like chickadees—visit multiple times.

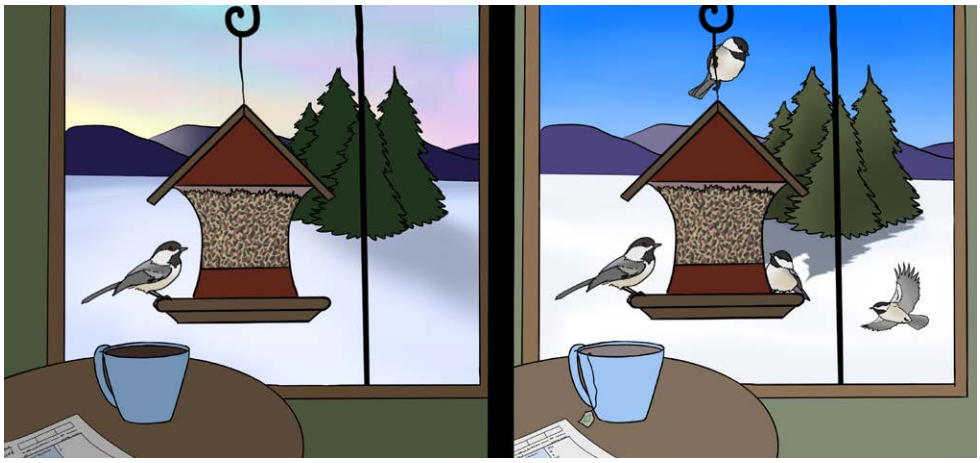


Illustration by Holly Faulkner

If you see one chickadee in the morning (left) and four later in the day (right) then your tally so far is four (not five), because four is the most you saw at once.

Let's imagine an example. In the morning, you watch your feeders and only see one chickadee at a time, even though you see about 20 different visits over the hour. You report "1" for your chickadee count that morning, because you only ever saw one bird at a time. Later in the day you sit down again (maybe with some afternoon tea), and you spot four chickadees all at once! Now you can increase your count for chickadees to "4." You don't add the morning and afternoon counts together because the chickadee you saw in the morning might be among those visiting in the afternoon. The next day you watch your count site for the second day of your two-day count, and you see three chickadees at the same time. Should you add these three to the four you saw the day before? No, because those three might be the same birds you saw the day before. You should report four chickadees when submitting your data because you can only be certain that you have at least four chickadees in your yard.

By reporting only the highest number of each species seen at the same time, is it possible that you are missing some individuals? Yes, of course, but that is OK. The most important thing is that everyone in FeederWatch counts the same way, even if the counts aren't recording the exact number of birds in your yard. Knowing the exact number is impossible unless birds are uniquely marked and do not move in and out of your yard—extremely unlikely! FeederWatch counts are a sample, or estimate, of what is in your yard. If everyone samples in the same way, then counts across species, space, and time are comparable to one another, allowing us to build a continentwide, three-decade-long dataset of bird abundance.

The need to count all species in the same way is why you should not count males and females separately if they visit your site at different times. You may know that you have a male and a female cardinal in your yard, but unless you saw both at the same time, you should report only one cardinal. This may feel wrong, but trust us, it is OK! The most important thing is to sample all species in the same way, so that we can estimate population changes through time for all the species that visit your yard.

FeederWatching During the Pandemic

What We Found in April 2020

BY KERRIE WILCOX, BIRDS CANADA

Just as the FeederWatch season was wrapping up, the worldwide pandemic hit and radically changed the way we live. COVID-19 forced us into social distancing and staying home. The FeederWatch team decided to extend the counting season through the end of April so that FeederWatchers could continue to submit data about the birds in their yards during these difficult times. We hoped that by enabling FeederWatchers to report birds for a few extra weeks, we would bring some cheer during the COVID-19 crisis.

"OH MY GOODNESS, thank you for extending Project FeederWatch count dates! It's one of the few joys and comforts in this crazy pandemic and my work-from-home relief."

Cathi Alloway, State College, Pennsylvania

We were overwhelmed by the responses we received following the news of the extension. We had no idea participants would be so excited for a few extra weeks of counting! The messages we received demonstrated the joy that people experience from participating in FeederWatch. Participants submitted more data in April and shared more sightings, experiences, and good wishes with us and with one another than ever before, reminding us how wonderful the community of FeederWatchers is.

"That is the best news I've heard today! Amazing, I will definitely extend my count—it is such a joyous experience to watch the birds and be helpful at the same time."

Cassandra Phillips, Toronto, Ontario

A Western Meadowlark made an early appearance in Irving Collins' yard in Shilo, Manitoba.

As a FeederWatcher myself, one bright spot about working from home and social distancing was the opportunity to spend more time watching and reporting the birds at my feeder. As a FeederWatch project leader, another bright spot was the encouragement that many participants sent with their checklists. For example, Irving Collins, of Shilo, Manitoba, wrote, "I am excited to see one [Western Meadowlark] with its bright yellow and black markings at this time of the year because it brings some excitement to a year of uncertainty and sadness. I am sending a photo [above] for you to enjoy also. Have a good day and stay safe."

During the extended weeks of FeederWatch, the bird communities changed with the start of migration. Across Canada and the northern U.S., FeederWatchers reported the return of many short-distance and early migrants: Red-winged Blackbirds, Yellow-rumped Warblers, Yellow-bellied Sapsuckers, Eastern Phoebes, Eastern Towhees, Golden and Ruby-crowned Kinglets, and Brown Thrashers. Participants were thrilled by the return of orioles (Baltimore in the East, Bullock's in the West) and eagerly put out nectar feeders, oranges, and jelly. You can explore the full April dataset on our website and make discoveries of your own by looking at the Bird Summaries by State or Province (**feederwatch.org/pfw/stateReport**). We are grateful to everyone who participated during the extended season, providing us with a unique dataset!

How Were April Counts Different?

Far North Region*

Migration had barely started by April, but FeederWatchers in the Far North region noticed an increase in the number of American Robins—a sign of spring for many! Participants in Alaska reported them at 19% of sites in the extended weeks compared with an average of 8% throughout the regular season.

Northwest Region

FeederWatchers reported more White-crowned Sparrows in this region than in the regular season. For example, White-crowned Sparrows jumped from visiting <20% of sites all season in Oregon to 61% in the extended weeks, and from 15% of sites to a whopping 65% of sites in British Columbia.

Central Region

Here, FeederWatchers reported more Dark-eyed Juncos during the final weeks of April than in the regular season. While Dark-eyed Juncos are common in winter in most FeederWatch regions, reports significantly increased in the Central region during migration. It may be that juncos and other birds seek out feeders more than usual to fuel up during migration. Juncos visited an average of 22% of sites during the regular FeederWatch season in Saskatchewan and more than 85% in the extended season. Likewise, Common Grackles returned to the Central region. Participants in North Dakota reported them at zero sites during the regular season and at 70% of sites during the extended season.

Southeast Region

In this region, FeederWatchers reported the migration of Ruby-throated Hummingbirds. In Texas, for example, 47% of the FeederWatch sites were visited by Ruby-throated Hummingbirds compared with <2% most of the season. Meanwhile, in North Carolina, Gray Catbirds visited fewer than 2% of sites all season but visited 33% in the extended weeks.

Southwest Region

This region saw the departure of Dark-eyed Juncos to more northern breeding areas. In Nevada, Dark-eyed Juncos visit an average of 65% of sites all season, but during late April they only visited 24% of sites.

Northeast Region

Interestingly, in the Northeast region a higher than usual percentage of sites were visited by Pileated Woodpeckers. Maryland participants reported 18% of sites were visited by Pileated Woodpeckers in the extended weeks compared with an average of just 6% of sites during the normal FeederWatch season. Why the increase in this non-migratory bird? It's possible diet composition changes leading into the breeding season brought more Pileateds to suet feeders in early spring for the high fat content.

It was exciting to see the results of the extended FeederWatch season during the worldwide pandemic. Thank you, FeederWatchers, for your extra effort and enthusiasm!

*See maps for each of these regions in the "Regional Roundup" starting on page 9.

Rare Treats!

A number of rare visitors were reported to FeederWatch during the extended weeks in April.

- A Blue Grosbeak was reported by Lillian Walsh of St. Lawrence, Newfoundland. She had the pleasure of observing this beautiful bird for more than a week at her feeders. This bird is rare in most of Canada at any time of year.
- A Western Tanager was reported by Edith Dubreuil in La Patrie, Québec (right). This species rarely visits eastern North America and is rare north of southern California in winter.

- In Drumheller, Alberta, an early Yellow-rumped Warbler visited Jody Allair's feeder and stayed more than a week. It survived -20 C (-4 F) temperatures and regularly fed on suet and sunflower seed fragments.
- A White-winged Dove was reported on April 10 by Jan Hamilton-Sherwonit in Old Saybrook, Connecticut (right). Their normal distribution is in the southern tier of the U.S. and south of the U.S. Border.

- A male Hooded Warbler was a rare feeder visitor in Montgomery, Virginia. It stopped in for a drink from Judy McCord's water feature. These birds breed throughout the state but are rarely seen during FeederWatch counts.

Regional Roundup

Trends and Highlights from the 2019–20 FeederWatch Season

BY EMMA GREIG, CORNELL LAB OF ORNITHOLOGY

Thank you to everyone who contributed their bird counts this past season. The grand total number of birds reported was the highest number ever: 7,551,144 birds on a record 184,676 checklists! Because we extended the season by a few weeks in April, participants reported more spring migrants, but even without the extension there were a record number of checklists. Read about the species that showed up during the April extension in Kerrie Wilcox's article on page 6.

In this Regional Roundup, we were careful to compare apples to apples, so the numbers in the Top-25 tables are based on the standard season dates before the extension began. That way we can attribute differences between last year and prior years to changes in bird populations or bird behavior, rather than changes in when people were counting. That doesn't mean your counts during the April season extension aren't useful, it just means that we have to consider those counts separately and carefully when making comparisons across seasons.

As in previous Roundups, the "Trend" column of the Top-25 tables shows how a species was doing in the most recent FeederWatch season compared to the average across previous seasons. One arrow up or down indicates an increase or decrease in percentage of sites visited by 5–10%, and two arrows indicates an increase or decrease by more than 10%.

Thank you for sharing your observations with FeederWatch and enjoy reading about trends across the continent... and a few trends from Hawaii!

Blue Jay by Harry Foster

Your Legacy for Birds

Contributing data to Project FeederWatch is an important way to leave a lasting legacy. A pledge of financial support through a gift in your estate plans is a way to help ensure that FeederWatch thrives into the future.

To learn more about planned giving, in the U.S. please visit **birds.cornell.giftplans.org**, and in Canada please visit **birdscanada.org/legacy**. Or donate to FeederWatch by visiting **feederwatch.org** and clicking on the "Donate" button on the home page. Thank you!

HAWAII TOP-10 LIST: 6 SITES

Rank	*Species*	*Average flock size*	*Percent of sites*
1	Zebra Dove	16	83
2	Java Sparrow	15	83
3	Common Myna	3	83
4	Spotted Dove	8	67
5	House Finch	4	67
6	Northern Cardinal	2	67
7	Red-whiskered Bulbul	3	50
8	Red-crested Cardinal	2	50
9	Pacific Golden-Plover	1	50
10	White-rumped Shama	1	50

Zebra Dove by Susan Szeszol

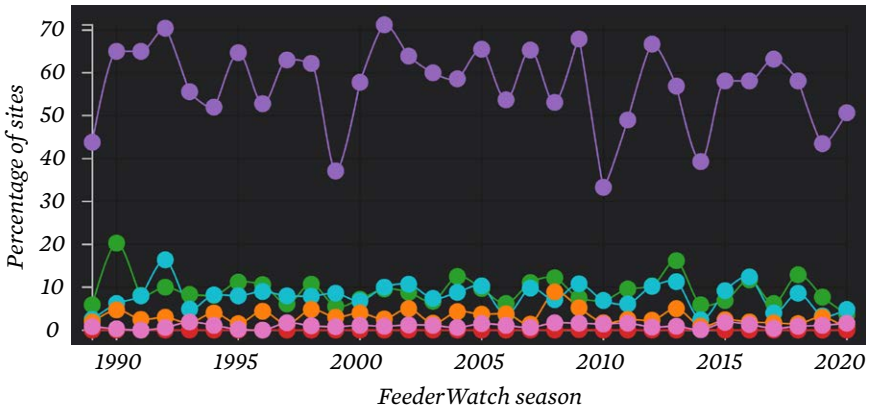
Last year we were happy to have six participants reporting their birds from three islands: Oahu, Kauai, and Hawaii. This is the best turnout so far for FeederWatch in Hawaii, so thank you all! Every year we learn more about feeder birds in Hawaii, and last year confirmed a pattern that occurs regularly: the most prevalent feeder birds in Hawaii are non-native, granivorous species. Zebra Doves and Java Sparrows were the top two species at FeederWatch sites in Hawaii, followed by Common Mynas, then two more granivorous species, Spotted Doves and House Finches. We did see one native in the Top-10 list last year, however: the Pacific Golden-Plover. What a treat! These plovers have a winter range that extends westward from California as far as northeastern Africa, encompassing the Hawaiian Islands, a great place for them to hang out in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

Far North Region

TOP-25 LIST: 66 SITES REPORTING

Rank	Species	Average flock size	Percent of sites	Trend
1	Black-capped Chickadee	5	85	
2	Black-billed Magpie	2	61	
3	Red-breasted Nuthatch	2	59	
4	Common Redpoll	11	58	↓↓
5	Boreal Chickadee	2	58	
6	Downy Woodpecker	1	56	
7	Hairy Woodpecker	1	55	
8	Pine Grosbeak	7	53	↓
9	Common Raven	2	53	↑
10	Canada Jay	2	45	↑
11	Dark-eyed Junco	5	39	↓
12	Steller's Jay	3	30	
13	Pine Siskin	12	27	
14	Bohemian Waxwing	7	27	↑↑
15	Varied Thrush	4	21	↑
16	White-winged Crossbill	5	18	↑↑
17	Chestnut-backed Chickadee	2	17	
18	Sharp-shinned Hawk	1	17	
19	Hoary Redpoll	3	14	↓
20	American Robin	3	14	
21	Ruffed Grouse	2	14	
22	Song Sparrow	1	14	
23	Pacific Wren	1	12	↑
24	Red Crossbill	4	11	
25	Northern Shrike	1	11	

Percentage of sites reporting Pine Grosbeaks



Pine Grosbeaks often show up at 50% or more of FeederWatch sites in the Far North (purple), but rarely at sites in other regions (other colors).

We love hearing from FeederWatchers in the Far North region because there are so few of them! Last year they reported some "usual suspects" that aren't usual at all for most of us. Species such as Canada Jays, Boreal Chickadees, and Pine Grosbeaks show up regularly in counts from the Far North, but we rarely see them in more southern locations. These species are used to cold weather and love evergreen forests for nesting and foraging. Other species such as Bohemian Waxwings and Black-billed Magpies are common in the Far North and do make some appearances in southern regions during winter, often at high elevations. This past season, Black-billed Magpies made a big showing at FeederWatch sites, visiting 61% of sites compared to 54% the season before. Bohemian Waxwings also showed big increases at Far North sites, visiting 27% of sites last season compared to 11% the season before.

Dark-eyed Juncos showed a decrease in the Far North, visiting only 39% of sites compared to 47% the season before. Why do some species increase and some decrease in the same year, and in the same region? It's hard to pinpoint exactly what drives changes in bird populations regionally (or locally!), but you can develop your own hypotheses based on your knowledge of the species you are curious about. Think about the links between the birds, their food sources, and their habitat. Bird abundance is often related to the abundance of food sources. Food source abundance is in turn related to habitat and climate, which can change on either short-term or long-term time scales. Think about how the climate or habitat is changing in your area to make educated guesses about the causes of changes in your local bird populations.

Pine Grosbeak by Tamara Reiser

Northeast Region

Participants in the Northeast recorded enough Northern Flickers this past winter to move the species into the Top-25 list for the first time ever, with 26% of FeederWatch sites reporting flickers. In the Southeast, by contrast, Northern Flickers continued a steady decline in winter, ranking at #40 this past season and being reported at only 16% of sites. Why the shift from southern abundance to northern? We can't say for sure without additional analyses, but perhaps as climate change leads to milder winters, individual flickers that moved south in previous winters no longer need to do so, causing counts in winter in the Northeast to increase while counts in the Southeast decrease.

Another species that is shifting its winter range north, yet didn't make it onto the Top-25 list in the Northeast, is the Eastern Bluebird. They ranked #26 this past season, showing up at 25% of feeders. Unlike flickers, which are on the rise in the Northeast but on the decline in the Southeast, Eastern Bluebirds are on the rise in both regions. In the Southeast, bluebirds showed up at 53% of sites last season and ranked #14 on the Top-25 list. Maybe next season Eastern Bluebirds will become abundant enough to make it onto the Top-25 list in the Northeast too.

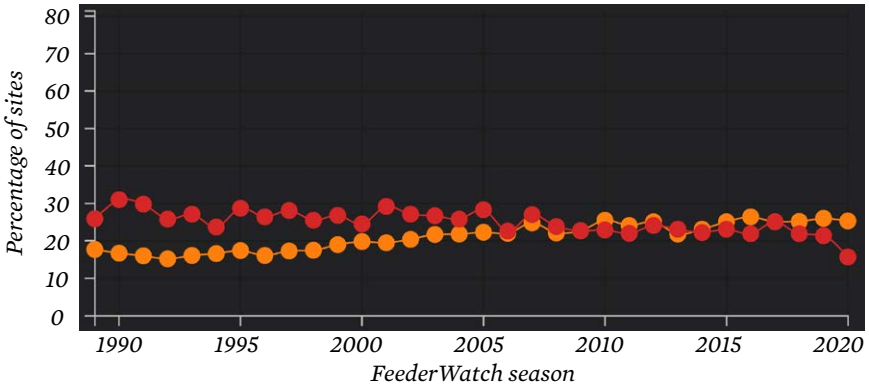
A Northern Flicker on Joan Wiitanen's suet feeder in Houghton, Michigan.

TOP-25 LIST: 7,614 SITES REPORTING

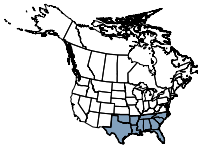
Rank	*Species*	*Average flock size*	*Percent of sites*	*Trend*
1	Chickadee*	2	95	
2	Dark-eyed Junco	4	93	
3	Downy Woodpecker	2	92	
4	Mourning Dove	4	91	
5	Northern Cardinal	3	90	
6	Blue Jay	3	90	
7	American Goldfinch	4	86	
8	White-breasted Nuthatch	1	80	
9	House Finch	4	75	
10	Red-bellied Woodpecker	1	72	▲
11	American Robin	2	65	▲
12	Tufted Titmouse	2	64	
13	European Starling	4	62	
14	Hairy Woodpecker	1	62	
15	House Sparrow	6	62	
16	Common Grackle	4	49	
17	Song Sparrow	1	49	
18	Carolina Wren	1	48	▲
19	Red-winged Blackbird	3	48	
20	White-throated Sparrow	3	45	
21	American Crow	2	44	▼▼
22	Brown-headed Cowbird	3	35	
23	Cooper's Hawk	1	29	
24	Purple Finch	2	27	▼
25	Northern Flicker	1	26	

*Chickadee combines Black-capped Chickadee and Carolina Chickadee

Percentage of sites reporting Northern Flicker in the Northeast and Southeast regions



Northern Flickers have become more abundant in the Northeast than the Southeast in winter, illustrated by the crossing red (Southeast) and orange (Northeast) lines.

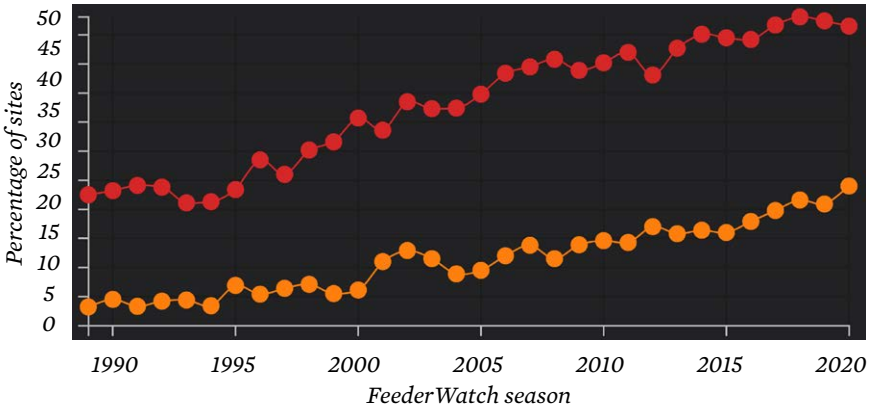


Southeast Region

TOP-25 LIST: 1,676 SITES REPORTING

Rank	Species	Average flock size	Percent of sites	Trend
1	Northern Cardinal	3	96	
2	Carolina Chickadee	2	88	
3	Mourning Dove	3	80	↘
4	Carolina Wren	1	80	
5	House Finch	3	79	
6	Tufted Titmouse	2	78	
7	Blue Jay	2	71	↘
8	Red-bellied Woodpecker	1	70	
9	Downy Woodpecker	1	68	
10	American Goldfinch	3	67	↘↘
11	Northern Mockingbird	1	64	
12	Chipping Sparrow	5	56	↗
13	American Robin	2	54	↘
14	Eastern Bluebird	2	53	↗
15	Dark-eyed Junco	3	52	↘↘
16	Yellow-rumped Warbler	2	45	
17	White-throated Sparrow	3	41	↘↘
18	Pine Warbler	2	41	↗
19	White-breasted Nuthatch	1	40	
20	Brown-headed Cowbird	4	39	
21	American Crow	2	38	↘
22	Red-winged Blackbird	5	37	
23	Brown Thrasher	1	37	
24	House Sparrow	4	35	
25	Eastern Phoebe	1	35	↗↗

Percentage of sites reporting Eastern Bluebirds



Eastern Bluebirds have shown steady increases in the Northeast (orange) and Southeast (red) over the past several decades.

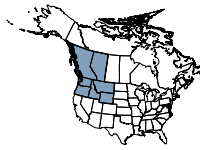
Once again, the Northern Cardinal is the most commonly reported species at FeederWatch sites in the Southeast region, as it has been since FeederWatch started! Northern Cardinals have been reported at 95% or more of sites in the Southeast since 1989 and have therefore always ranked #1 on the Southeast Top-25 list. That's pretty amazing, and it shows how useful it can be for a species to be able to live and nest near people. Northern Cardinals thrive in the brushy edge habitat that surrounds many of our backyards and parks.

A new arrival to the Top-25 list in the Southeast region is the Eastern Phoebe. They have never made the list before, so why now? Perhaps, like Northern Cardinals, their ability to nest near people and even directly on human-made structures such as bridges and buildings contributes to their success. You probably won't see phoebes eating from your feeders (though you might if you provide mealworms), but you may see them foraging for flying insects in your yard, because of habitat that you provide, or drinking from your bird bath. If you are lucky, you may have them nesting under an awning or deck!

Eastern Phoebe by Gary Mueller

It's not every day that you see a Northern Cardinal and an Eastern Bluebird sharing a meal, as these birds were on a snowy day in February at Bob Vuxinic's feeder in Crossville, Tennessee.

Northwest Region



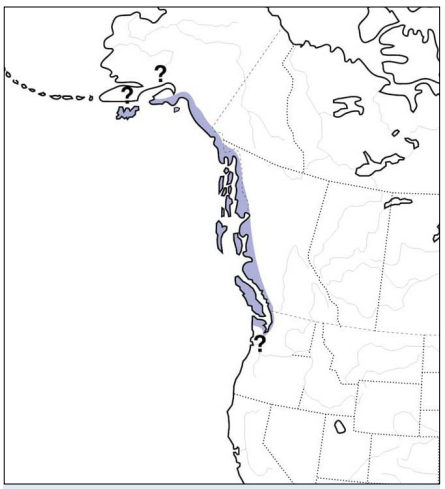
The Northwest saw a new arrival to the Top-25 list last year: the Bewick's Wren. According to the North American Breeding Bird Survey, Bewick's Wren populations declined by 39% between 1966 and 2015, so we were surprised to see them on the rise at FeederWatch sites. In both the Northwest and Southwest regions, Bewick's Wrens have increased significantly, from around 10% of sites hosting them in the 1990s to now more than 20% of sites hosting them. Why the discrepancy between trends in the different long-term datasets? Perhaps Bewick's Wrens are shifting their winter habitat use to backyards. Alternatively, perhaps more people are building their homes in Bewick's Wren habitat! Having a species in decline that is simultaneously appearing more often at FeederWatch sites emphasizes the importance of maintaining bird-friendly habitat around your home.

There was a change for corvids in the Northwest last year: the Northwestern Crow is gone, but not because of a population decline. It is now considered a subspecies of the American Crow. The Northwestern Crow was found along the coast in the Pacific Northwest. Where their range overlapped with American Crows, they interbred and were indistinguishable, so the American Ornithological Society (the society that officially names birds) decided to consider them the same species.

TOP-25 LIST: 1,338 SITES REPORTING

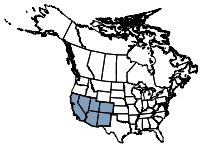
Rank	*Species*	*Average flock size*	*Percent of sites*	*Trend*
1	Dark-eyed Junco	7	91	
2	Black-capped Chickadee	3	86	
3	Northern Flicker	2	81	
4	Red-breasted Nuthatch	1	73	▲▲
5	House Finch	4	72	
6	Downy Woodpecker	1	69	▲
7	American Robin	2	63	
8	Spotted Towhee	2	61	▲
9	Song Sparrow	2	61	
10	Steller's Jay	3	58	
11	Anna's Hummingbird	2	55	▲▲
12	Chestnut-backed Chickadee	3	54	▲
13	European Starling	4	48	▼
14	Pine Siskin	4	47	▼▼
15	House Sparrow	6	44	▼
16	Bushtit	9	41	▲▲
17	American Goldfinch	5	41	
18	American Crow	3	39	
19	Varied Thrush	2	38	
20	Hairy Woodpecker	1	36	
21	Eurasian Collared-Dove	3	30	▲▲
22	Golden-crowned Sparrow	3	30	
23	White-crowned Sparrow	2	29	▲
24	Bewick's Wren	1	28	▲
25	Fox Sparrow	2	26	

American Crow by Brandon Green in Eugene, Oregon.



Range map provided by Birds of the World, birdsoftheworld.org

The range of the Northwestern Crow, now a subspecies of American Crow.



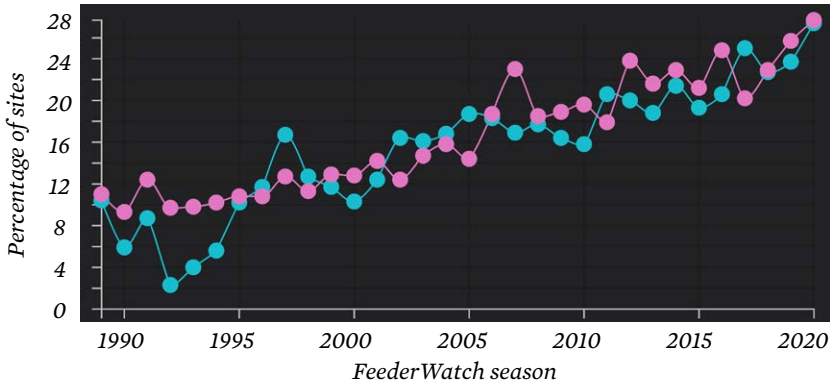
Southwest Region

TOP-25 LIST: 1,175 SITES REPORTING

Rank	Species	Average flock size	Percent of sites	Trend
1	House Finch	5	92	
2	Dark-eyed Junco	4	78	
3	Mourning Dove	4	62	↘
4	Lesser Goldfinch	5	56	
5	White-crowned Sparrow	5	54	
6	Northern Flicker	1	50	
7	American Robin	2	49	↘
8	Anna's Hummingbird	2	48	
9	House Sparrow	5	47	↘
10	Eurasian Collared-Dove	3	46	↗
11	Spotted Towhee	1	45	
12	American Goldfinch	4	45	↘
13	Pine Siskin	5	39	
14	Downy Woodpecker	1	38	↗
15	American Crow	3	37	
16	Bushtit	6	36	↗
17	Scrub-Jay*	2	36	
18	White-breasted Nuthatch	1	35	
19	California Towhee	2	34	
20	Cooper's Hawk	1	34	
21	Yellow-rumped Warbler	1	33	↗
22	Red-breasted Nuthatch	1	32	↗↗
23	Black-capped Chickadee	2	31	
24	Oak/Juniper Titmouse	1	30	
25	Bewick's Wren	1	29	↗

*Scrub-Jay combines California Scrub-Jay and Woodhouse's Scrub-Jay

Percentage of sites reporting Bewick's Wrens in the Southwest and Northwest regions



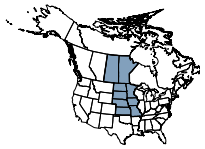
Bewick's Wrens are increasing at FeederWatch sites in the Northwest (blue) and Southwest (pink) regions.

The top two species in the Southwest region have been the same since the beginning of FeederWatch: House Finch at #1 and Dark-eyed Junco at #2. The species at the bottom of the list, however, have been changing year after year. This is the second year that the Bewick's Wren made it to the Top-25 list in the Southwest, which parallels what is happening in the Northwest; Bewick's Wrens are slowly but steadily increasing in prevalence at FeederWatch sites in winter. Who got bumped from the list when the Bewick's Wren moved up? One recently missing species is the European Starling. This non-native species hasn't been on the Southwest's Top-25 list since the 2016–17 FeederWatch season, illustrating their continent-wide declines in North America.

Another non-native species showing declines is the House Sparrow. They have been counted at a record low 47% of FeederWatch sites in the Southwest this past season. Although House Sparrows are still abundant enough to make the Top-25 list, ranking at #9 last season, they are consistently declining throughout their range, especially in urban areas. Read more about House Sparrow declines on page 3, from Liam Berigan's study using FeederWatch data.

This Bewick's Wren is gathering nesting material for one of the nest boxes in Vicki Miller's yard in Kelseyville, California.

Central Region



Species that show irruptive behavior (northern species that periodically move south when their food sources are low) had a poor showing last year at some FeederWatch sites, especially in the Central region. Red-breasted Nuthatches, Pine Siskins, and Common Redpolls were all down compared to the previous several years, which suggests that natural food sources in coniferous forests were abundant. As Erica Dunn, the founder of FeederWatch, showed in recent research, it is actually a good thing when irruptive species don't irrupt: it not only means they have natural food sources, but staying put uses less of their energy reserves and aids survival into the next season.

A more consistent species in the Central region took the top spot last year: the Dark-eyed Junco. This species is one of the most commonly reported birds in FeederWatch, partly because it is widespread throughout the continent. Despite their wide range, juncos are showing slow but steady declines based on North American Breeding Bird Survey reports, having decreased in population by 50% between 1966 and 2015. So although they still show up at many feeder sites in North America, they are less abundant than they once were. This means that you might notice smaller flocks than you used to report. You can help them by keeping your yard pesticide free, planting native plants, and leaving areas unmowed or messy with fallen leaves—the birds will thank you!

Red-breasted Nuthatches will grab a seed or a bite of suet if you give them the opportunity.

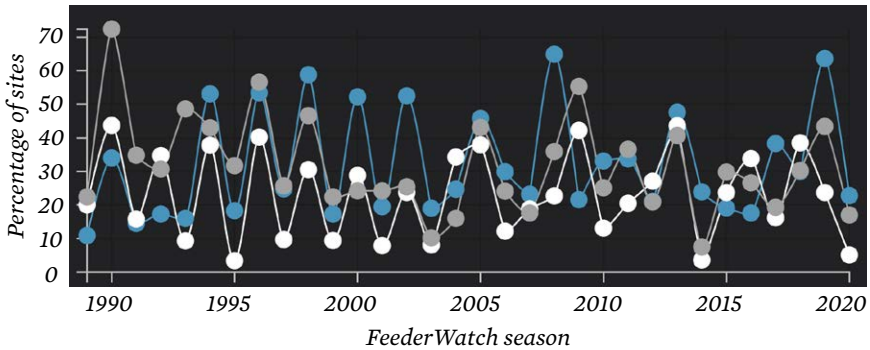
Linda Petersen

TOP-25 LIST: 862 SITES REPORTING

Rank	*Species*	*Average flock size*	*Percent of sites*	*Trend*
1	Dark-eyed Junco	4	93	
2	Chickadee*	3	92	
3	Downy Woodpecker	2	91	
4	Blue Jay	2	86	
5	White-breasted Nuthatch	1	81	
6	Northern Cardinal	3	74	
7	American Goldfinch	4	73	
8	House Finch	4	73	
9	House Sparrow	7	68	
10	Red-bellied Woodpecker	1	67	
11	Hairy Woodpecker	1	66	
12	American Robin	2	62	
13	Mourning Dove	3	56	
14	European Starling	4	41	↓↓
15	American Crow	2	40	↓
16	Northern Flicker	1	34	
17	Red-winged Blackbird	4	32	
18	White-throated Sparrow	3	30	
19	Common Grackle	3	30	↓
20	Pileated Woodpecker	1	28	
21	Carolina Wren	1	27	
22	Tufted Titmouse	2	26	
23	Purple Finch	3	26	↓↓
24	Red-breasted Nuthatch	1	23	↓↓
25	Cooper's Hawk	1	19	

*Chickadee combines Black-capped Chickadee and Carolina Chickadee

Percentage of sites reporting three irruptive species



Red-breasted Nuthatches (blue), Common Redpolls (white), and Pine Siskins (gray) have similar population fluctuations in the Central region. These patterns are driven by boom and bust cycles of natural foods in northern coniferous forests.

Two Confusing Sparrows

Distinguishing Fox Sparrows and Song Sparrows

BY ANNE MARIE JOHNSON, CORNELL LAB OF ORNITHOLOGY

Song Sparrows are one of the most common sparrows in North America. They can be found across most of the continental U.S. in winter. Similar looking Fox Sparrows are limited to the Pacific coast south of Alaska and the southeastern third of the continent in winter, but they migrate through much of the rest of the continent in spring and fall. Where the species overlap, they are easily confused for one another. It doesn't help that these two sparrows have a variety of plumages and can look different depending on where you see them!

Brandon Green

In the Pacific Northwest, Song Sparrows like this one from Eugene, Oregon, can be very dark, but they still have a muted brown eyeline and mustache stripe, contrasting with a grayer eyebrow and cheek.

Both sparrows are primarily brown with streaky white chests and bellies and with central chest spots, and they both forage on the ground by hopping and scratching with both feet. The best way to distinguish them is by their facial patterns: Fox Sparrows typically either have a rufous cheek or a dark face with almost no facial pattern, whereas Song Sparrows have a gray cheek that contrasts with a brown eyeline. In addition, Fox Sparrows typically have a bicolor bill with some yellow, unlike Song Sparrows, which have gray bills. Also, the chest streaks on Fox Sparrows tend to be thicker and smudgier than on Song Sparrows.

Song Sparrow

- 12–17 cm (4.7–6.7 in)
- Brown-streaked back with rusty brown wings and tail, faint wingbars
- Brown streaks on chest and sides, central chest spot
- Brown cap with gray crown stripe
- Gray eyebrow and cheek that contrasts with brown eyeline and mustache stripe
- White malar separated from white throat by bold, brown throat stripe
- Gray bill

Robert Vuxinic

Fox Sparrow (East)

- 15–19 cm (6–7.5 in)
- Rufous wings and rufous-streaked back, faint wingbars
- Rufous triangular smudges that form streaks on chest and sides, central chest spot
- Rufous cap with faint gray crown stripe
- Broad gray eyebrow that contrasts with rufous cheek patch
- Rufous throat stripe contrasting with variable white malar and central throat
- Bicolor bill, usually with some yellow

Gary Mueller

Fox Sparrow (West)

- 15–19 cm (5.7–7.5 in)
- Dark brown or rufous wings, faint or no wingbars
- Dark brown nearly solid or barely-streaked chest, dark brown streaks or spots on sides and belly
- Solid, dark brown or gray back and face
- Yellow, or yellow and gray bill

Jean Oeldewaldt

BirdSpotter Photo Contest Highlights

BY HOLLY FAULKNER, CORNELL LAB OF ORNITHOLOGY

Project FeederWatch ran its 8th annual BirdSpotter photo contest during the 2019–20 season. Participants in the contest had a lot to share! Just more than 2,100 entries were submitted, and they earned more than 15,000 votes in total.

We spiced it up last year and introduced some new categories: "Splash of Sunshine" featured yellow birds for a pop of color in the drabbest parts of winter, "Beautiful Blues and Grays" celebrated our favorite birds sporting these more muted tones, and "Spectacular Sparrows" highlighted the various "LBBs" (little brown birds) that we find at our feeders. You can find all the entries on our website (click on "BirdSpotter" in the "Community" tab) and get the full stories behind the winning photos, classrooms, and data entry responses on our blog. Thank you to all BirdSpotter participants and thank you to Wild Birds Unlimited for their support for BirdSpotter and for Project FeederWatch.

A Few of Our Favorite Eyecatchers from Last Season

Clockwise from top left: Clark's Nutcracker by Tim J. Nicol, Pileated Woodpecker by Melanie Palik, Greater Roadrunner by Roger Gray, and Northern Cardinal by Sujata Roy.

Last Year's Winners

Eileen Chorba took home the top Grand Prize last year with her shot of an American Goldfinch perched on a cherry tree.

This Eastern Bluebird posed perfectly for Mary Santangelo and won second-place Grand Prize.

Pam Garcia's orange and jelly feeders attracted these Orchard Orioles. The bright, colorful photo earned her third-place Grand Prize.