FOCUS ON CITIZEN SCIENCE • VOLUME 20

Winter Bird Highlights

From Project FeederWatch 2023–24

Cornell Lab of Ornithology

BIRDS CANADA
OISEAUX CANADA

Remembering Emma Greig

We were heartbroken to share the news in early January that Emma Greig passed away over the holiday break from cancer at the age of 43. Emma led Project FeederWatch in the United States for more than 10 years with her signature mix of vision, wisdom, diligence, limitless curiosity, good humor, and warmth. In that time she oversaw a near doubling in FeederWatch registrations, published more than 20 scientific papers spanning both birds and the benefits of birdwatching for people, continued her lifelong hobby of raising and caring for Gouldian Finches, and started a loving family. We dearly miss her intelligence, kindness, and deep commitment to Project FeederWatch and its participants. During this difficult time, our staff will endeavor to keep FeederWatch running smoothly, as Emma would wish. We invite you to read more about and celebrate Emma's life in a remembrance posted on the Cornell Lab's All About Birds website at www.allaboutbirds.org/news/remembering-emma-greig-feederwatch-leader.

Emma wrote the Regional Roundup that begins on page 8 before she fell ill, leaving us one last look at her highlights from a season of FeederWatch. We hope you enjoy this issue of *Winter Bird Highlights* and join us in celebrating Emma's incredible, albeit tragically short, life.

Cover photo: Northern Flicker in Pueblo West, Colorado.
Linda Cunico / Project FeederWatch

Below: Emma at the Finch Café in Katherine, Northern Territory, Australia, in 2018 in front of a mural of a Gouldian Finch. Photo by Daniel Hooper.

Focus on Citizen Science is a publication highlighting contributions of citizen scientists. This issue, *Winter Bird Highlights 2024*, 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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Early Look at Mammal Data

By Heidi Faulkner, Cornell Lab of Ornithology

For the first time last season, Project FeederWatch participants were able to report mammals along with their regular bird counts. We were delighted to see that 76% of participants watched their count sites for mammals, even though the ability to report mammals wasn't available in the mobile app until the end of the season. The variety of mammals reported ranged from squirrels to armadillos.

Unsurprisingly, participants reported squirrels more often than other mammals at their count sites.

Squirrel drinking from an ant moat above a hummingbird feeder at FeederWatcher Marie Lehmann's site in Milton, Florida.

Mammals Reported

Mammal	*Number of Checklists*	*Percent of Checklists*
Squirrel	125,460	76.2
Dog	25,172	15.3
Chipmunk	21,704	13.2
Domestic Cat (other household or feral)	15,132	9.2
Rabbit	12,256	7.5
Deer	12,151	7.4
Participant-owned Cat	7,576	4.6
Raccoon	3,264	2.0
Other Small Mammals	2,592	1.6
Fox	2,387	1.5
Oppossum	2,088	1.3
Rat	1,738	1.1
Other Mammals	1,508	0.9
Skunk	1,029	0.6
Marmot/Groundhog	951	0.6
Coyote	681	0.4
Weasel	232	0.1
Bear	162	0.1
Armadillo	94	0.1

The "percent of checklists" column provides the percentage of checklists that included a report of the mammal (only counting data from people who submitted mammal observations).

In the US and Canada, there are a wide variety of squirrel species including red squirrels, eastern and western gray squirrels, and flying squirrels. For FeederWatch data entry, these species were categorized together as "squirrels." Participants who reported recording mammal observations on their checklists reported squirrels on 76.2% of those checklists.

Participants reported domestic dogs (on 15.3% of checklists) and chipmunks (on 13.2% of checklists) much less frequently than squirrels but more fequently than other mammals. Chipmunks are small, striped rodents that are members of the squirrel family, specifically, ground squirrels. North America boasts 24 species of chipmunk, and like squirrels, they were lumped into a single category for reporting purposes.

Domestic cats, specifically those that were feral or from other households, were reported on 9.2% of checklists. Participant-owned cats were less frequently reported (on 4.6% of checklists), so well done to FeederWatchers for keeping cats indoors for the health of your cats and the birds.

Participants reported rabbits and deer on 7.5% and 7.4% of checklists respectively. Rabbits and deer, like most other mammals, may be interested in fallen seeds below feeders, though deer can often reach low-hanging feeders. Participants reported other mammal species on less than 5% of checklists.

We look forward to hearing about the mammals participants see in their count sites this season and beyond. Data on mammals will help us track mammal populations over time.

People and Birds May Influence Each Other's Health and Wellbeing

By Alia Dietsch, Ohio State University

Project FeederWatch participants love the birds around their homes, schoolyards, office buildings, and local parks. FeederWatch participants can share what birds and mammals they see, if and when they provide supplemental food, what interactions they witness between wildlife, and more.

FeederWatcher Marianna inspecting new feeders added to her site. Photo provided by Marianna's mother, Erin (last name withheld).

We are learning more about the interactions between people and wildlife, thanks to a grant from the US National Science Foundation. Since the 2023–24 season, participants have the option to report how they manage their count area, such as changing the amount of food they provide, cleaning feeders, or adding a brush pile. We are also gathering information about how participants feel when making various observations during their FeederWatch counts. Your contributions are providing valuable insights.

The research team loves 😍 that most FeederWatchers have been using the new data entry system to tell us about the emotional responses they experience in relation to what is happening in their watch area. Participants may report feeling happy 😀 about the birds they are seeing or sad 😔 about an interaction they saw. Perhaps they felt angry 😠 about an unwanted visitor in their watch area, or something else entirely. Participants can let us know by selecting the emoticons that best match their response. We understand that emoticons may not perfectly capture every experience or emotion people have in their watch area and some folks may not enjoy reporting them, but the data we are collecting are important. Your health and wellbeing matter to us, and we are sincerely grateful for all the input provided last season. Sharing your feelings in this way helps us understand how human responses to what is observed in watch areas may lead to improved outcomes for birds and people.

FeederWatchers who opt into the social science research can report feelings by clicking on emojis.

Research suggests that people experience health and well-being benefits from time spent in nature, which includes time spent seeing and hearing birds. However, it's less clear exactly how those benefits add up over time and whether certain human behaviors are better than other behaviors for both birds and people. Thanks to the research grant, we were able to expand the FeederWatch data entry system and administer a survey pre- and post-season to gather the data needed to answer these questions. We are very grateful to the participants who have shared their emotional responses throughout the season and completed the pre- and post-season surveys. Thanks to your efforts, we are learning whether this approach can successfully shed light on the ways in which humans and birds might benefit from each other. We are also sincerely grateful for those who provided information last season about accessibility and how to improve the data entry interface—we made some changes to the data entry systems based on that feedback with the intent of improving accessibility this season. Please, keep entering those data!

Helping All People Access Project FeederWatch

by Kelley Langhans, Virginia Tech

As part of the research funded by the U.S. National Science Foundation, we are also learning ways to improve our outreach efforts to people we aren't currently reaching. In an assessment before the start of last season, we found that 86% of current Project FeederWatch participants identify as white while 70% of the U.S. population that feeds birds identify this way. And while 21% of the U.S. bird-feeding public self-identifies as disabled and 12% as neurodiverse, that's only true of 4% and 6% of FeederWatchers. (Neurodiverse is a non-medical term to describe the unique ways in which people's brains work; someone with autism, ADHD, or mental health conditions might describe themselves as neurodiverse.)

To learn how we could make Project FeederWatch more inclusive, accessible, and welcoming for different groups of people who enjoy feeding and watching birds, we held nine online focus groups comprised of non-FeederWatchers who fed birds and identified as any of the following: Black, Indigenous, people of color (BIPOC), disabled, or neurodivergent. These focus groups involved researcher-led conversations where we described Project FeederWatch and then asked people what they liked about the project, what they found to be exclusionary, and how we could make the project more inclusive. The 43 focus group participants shared many thoughtful insights with us, and we're looking forward to taking what we learned to make Project FeederWatch a welcoming space for everyone who wants to engage in participatory science! Further, we are expanding partnerships with groups like Birdability, a non-profit focused on increasing accessibility in birding for people with mobility and other challenges, to make FeederWatch more welcoming to more people.

White-breasted Nuthatch in Lower Truro, Nova Scotia.
Kelleigh Farr / Project FeederWatch

Thank you!

Last FeederWatch season was a milestone—we made it possible to collect and enter data about mammals, sick birds, bird mortality, and even your own emotional responses to observations. It was a big change for FeederWatch.

We asked many of you what you thought about the new types of data, and we heard what you had to say: many participants expressed enthusiasm for entering mammal data (which is here to stay). We also appreciate all the detailed feedback about data entry that you provided, and we have incorporated as many suggestions as possible. Thank you for your enthusiasm for birds and for FeederWatch, and thank you for helping us to make the program better every season.

Find Bird Trends Online

See the trends for your favorite birds at **feederwatch.org/explore/trend-graphs.**

The Expansion of the Eurasian Collared-Dove in North America

By Olivia Carvalho, Birds Canada

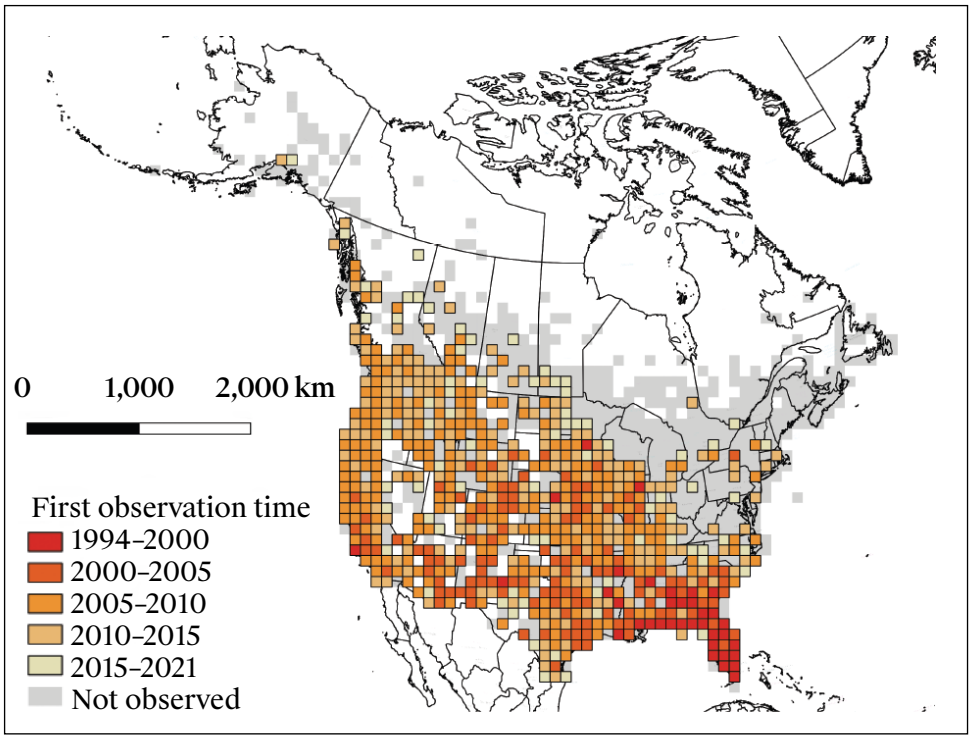
The Eurasian Collared-Dove has expanded its range vastly in North America since it arrived. First introduced in the Bahamas in 1974, it has since spread to much of the United States and Canada. Data collected by Project FeederWatch participants has helped us better understand why the Eurasian Collared-Dove has flourished in North America.

Eurasian Collared-Dove in Whitehorse, Yukon.
Cameron Eckert / Macaulay Library

Colonization and Range Expansion

Upon arrival, the Eurasian Collared-Dove began a rapid northwest spread across North America. By the 1980s, it was seen in Florida but didn't reach Canada until 2000, where it popped up in British Columbia and has continued to expand. This expansion has been linked to its adaptability to diverse habitats, allowing the Eurasian Collared-Dove to thrive in urban areas, agricultural spaces, and grasslands.

Previous studies of the colonization of North America by this dove suggested that the species showed a preference for a northwestern direction in its expansion. However, recent research by a team, including Birds Canada Senior Scientist Danielle Ethier[1] indicates that this pattern may not solely be a matter of directional preference but also a reflection of habitat selection. By utilizing data from Project FeederWatch, researchers have gained insights into the environmental factors influencing the Eurasian Collared-Dove's range expansion.



Years of initial FeederWatch reports of the Eurasian Collared-Dove (*Streptopelia decaocto*) 1994–2021, grouped into 5-year periods (18,660 reports from 342,910 checklists).

Habitat Preferences and Environmental Factors

The recent research reveals that the Eurasian Collared-Dove prefers grassland habitats and thrives in regions with higher temperatures, increased precipitation, and greater elevation. However, because of the Eurasian Collared-Dove's adaptability to urban environments, it has become a common bird in many cities. Bird feeders and trees planted in urban areas have supported their expansion into these areas.

Learning from Population Growth

The new State of Canada's Birds report[2], which uses data from volunteer-based science projects, shows that the Eurasian Collared-Dove's population has increased with an annual trend of 85% in the early 2010s before leveling off around 2016 in Canada.

The population increase offers valuable insights into the dynamics of range expansion. The dove's colonization patterns reveal a connection between habitat preferences and environmental factors, highlighting the importance of understanding ecological needs in the context of species distribution. By utilizing data from Project FeederWatch, researchers have gained a clearer picture of the reasons behind the dove's western expansion. The journey of the Eurasian Collared-Dove not only enriches our understanding of bird ecology but also illustrates the importance of data-driven approaches for conservation efforts in changing ecosystems.

[1]Shao, Y., Ethier, D. M., & Bonner, S. J. (2023). Invasion dynamics of the European collared-dove in North America are explained by combined effects of habitat and climate. *Ornithological Applications*, 126(1). doi.org/10.1093/ornithapp/duad052.

[2]Birds Canada and Environment and Climate Change Canada. 2024. The State of Canada's Birds Report. Accessed from NatureCounts. nature-counts.ca/nc/socb-epoc/report/2024/en/.

Eurasian Collared-Dove in Parker, Colorado. Patricia Jones-Mestas / Project FeederWatch

New FeederWatch Leader at Birds Canada

After 25 years at Birds Canada, Kerrie Wilcox has moved on from her role as Canadian Leader of Project FeederWatch and the Great Backyard Bird Count. Kerrie's dedication to supporting the volunteers who spend their winter months diligently watching their feeders was reflected in the growth and success of these programs. Thank you for your tremendous contributions to bird research and conservation. Wishing you all the best in your next adventures.

Olivia Carvalho has joined the winter birding fun as the Community Engagement Specialist for Birds Canada. She will now coordinate Project FeederWatch and the Great Backyard Bird Count in Canada, Olivia brings a shared passion for community science and taking conservation action at-home. She looks forward to nurturing these beloved winter bird initiatives and joining a growing community of FeederWatchers across North America. Welcome, Olivia!

Kerrie Wilcox, left, former FeederWatch leader at Birds Canada, and her replacement, Olivia Carvalho. Photos provided by Birds Canada.

2023–24 FeederWatch season statistics

32,937 Participants
233,750 Checklists

Blue Jay by Harry Foster / Project FeederWatch

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 Join, Renew or Donate button on the home page and then clicking the Donate button. Thank you!

Regional Roundup

Trends and Highlights from the 2023–24 FeederWatch Season

By Emma Greig, Cornell Lab of Ornithology

Thank you, FeederWatchers, for another wonderful year of FeederWatching! The 2023–24 season was fascinating, in part because many of you submitted data not only about your birds, but also about your mammals, changes to your count sites, and even how you felt about your observations. We have been doing a deep dive into these data and have some articles in this issue of *Winter Bird Highlights* talking about some of the patterns that emerged from your observations. For this regional roundup, however, we will stick to the birds.

This past season you submitted 233,750 checklists and reported birds from 16,623 different counting locations. Amazingly, 11,962 of those locations had bird counts from prior years—thank you returning participants. Plus, we were thrilled to see counts from 4,661 new locations, adding data from fresh sites that we hope to hear from for many years to come. We also heard from 592 people who FeederWatch without bird feeders. This may seem counterintuitive because of the name of the program, but it is perfectly reasonable to FeederWatch feederless, and in fact it is giving us a glimpse into what bird communities look like in yards without supplementary food. We hope to start analyses comparing bird communities in yards with and without feeders soon, so stay tuned for more on this topic in the future. Thank you all so much!

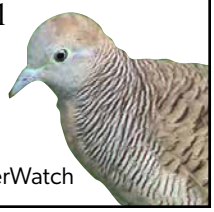
We heard from many of you last year asking, "where have all the birds gone?" and telling us that bird counts seemed lower at your count sites than in the past. You were correct: last season the average number of birds per checklist was 37 individuals. This average may seem high to many participants, but comparing this average to the average from previous years provides some perspective. The 37 birds per checklist average is the lowest average for at least the past 10 years. Exactly why birds were relatively scarce this past season is not entirely clear. Some of the decline is likely due to the unseasonably mild winter in many parts of the U.S. and Canada, leading many birds to find natural food more easily and not visit our feeders. Alternatively, it could reflect the long-term decline of many bird species in North America. We are eager to see what FeederWatchers report this year to see if the pattern continues or if bird numbers return to a more normal range.

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 the previous ten 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%. Use these arrows to see how different the counts were last season compared to what is typical for that species for the past decade.

Hawaii Top-10 List: 3 Sites

Rank	Species	*Average flock size*	*Percent of sites*
1	Zebra Dove	8	100
2	Common Myna	3	100
3	Spotted Dove	9	67
4	Red-vented Bulbul	2	67
5	House Finch	2	67
6	Red-crested Cardinal	2	67
7	Northern Cardinal	1	67
8	House Sparrow	19	33
9	Java Sparrow	3	33
10	Red-billed Leiothrix	3	33

Thank you to the three participants who counted from Hawaii last season—we are always grateful to hear about the birds of the islands. The top species last year were Zebra Doves and Common Mynahs, two species that were introduced from Asia. Mynahs were introduced in the mid-1800s to control agricultural pests, and Zebra Doves were introduced in the early 1900s, probably accidentally as released pets.



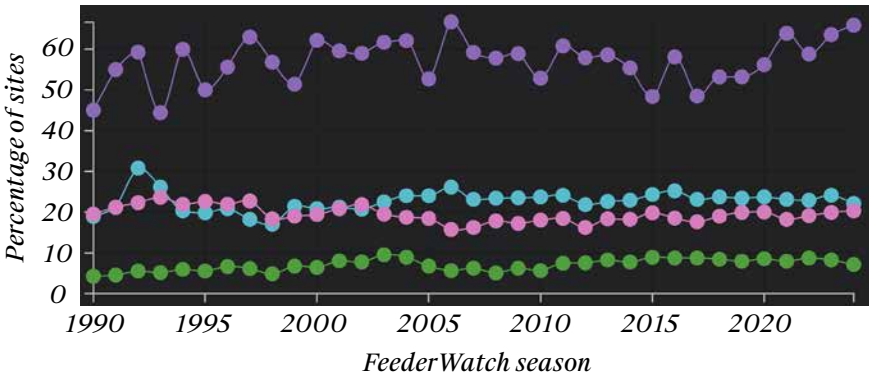
Zebra Dove by Susan Szesol / Project FeederWatch

Far North Region

Top-25 List: 81 Sites Reporting

Rank	Species	*Average flock size*	*Percent of sites*	*Trend*
1	Redpoll	25	91	↑↑
2	Black-capped Chickadee	4	88	↑
3	Red-breasted Nuthatch	2	71	↑↑
4	Black-billed Magpie	2	66	↑
5	Pine Grosbeak	7	63	↑
6	Downy Woodpecker	1	60	↑
7	Hairy Woodpecker	1	59	↑
8	Boreal Chickadee	2	56	
9	Dark-eyed Junco	6	48	
10	Canada Jay	2	45	
11	Common Raven	2	40	↓
12	Steller's Jay	3	37	
13	Pine Siskin	29	23	
14	Bohemian Waxwing	25	16	
15	Chestnut-backed Chickadee	3	16	
16	European Starling	5	11	
17	Varied Thrush	3	11	
18	Song Sparrow	1	10	
19	White-crowned Sparrow	5	9	
20	American Robin	6	7	
21	American Crow	2	6	
22	Sharp-shinned Hawk	1	6	↓
23	Fox Sparrow	2	4	↓
24	Golden-crowned Sparrow	1	4	
25	Rock Pigeon	3	4	

Percentage of Sites Reporting Black-billed Magpies



Black-billed Magpies are most common in the Far North region (purple), but also show up in the Northwest (blue), Southwest (pink), and Central (green) regions.

Last season we heard from 81 participants in the Far North region—a good showing, considering it is the least populated of all the FeederWatch regions. Participants recorded some delightful northern species, the most abundant of which was the Redpoll, showing up at 91% of count sites. Redpolls show up some years in large numbers and some years in small numbers depending upon the abundance of natural foods. The large flocks at feeders last winter suggests that natural foods were more scarce than usual. Redpolls are a fascinating species with some great adaptations to survive in cold weather, including tunneling into the snow to stay warm on cold winter nights and being able to consume 42% of their body mass in seeds every day.

Another species that always has a good showing in the Far North is the Black-billed Magpie. This species visited 66% of sites last season. It shouldn't surprise us that Black-billed Magpies show up near feeders regularly because these clever birds have been following people around for centuries trying to find an easy meal. Lewis and Clark reported magpies coming into their tents to steal food during their 1804–1806 expedition, and there are reports of magpies following Native Americas around and feasting on leftover bison kills. Magpies have certainly earned their reputation as camp robbers.

A Black-billed Magpie perched on a stop sign.
Thomas Meinzen / Project FeederWatch

Northeast Region

We heard from a whopping 9,700 participants in the Northeast. We couldn't be more grateful to everyone who supports Project FeederWatch and submits observations. The Northeast is home to some of the most popular feeder visitors, such as Northern Cardinals, which visited 88% of Northeastern sites last season. Exactly what makes a species popular is a bit of a guessing game, but the males' stunning red plumage, which is especially striking against a backdrop of falling white snow, might help. Northern Cardinals are also the most common state bird in the U.S., being chosen by seven states. Lucky for all of us, cardinals are doing well in all the regions that observe them, perhaps because they like to inhabit areas that are used by people. As suburban habitats have expanded over the past half century, cardinals have followed suit. They enjoy the seeds offered in our bird feeders, and in the spring you may notice them nesting in low bushes near the edges of your lawn or around your home or office.

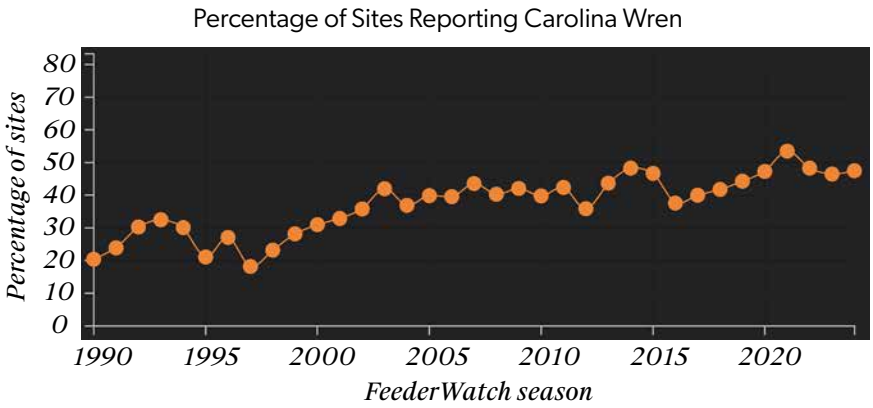
Perhaps opposite in style to the Northern Cardinal is the inconspicuous Carolina Wren, a species that has been steadily increasing in the Northeast region as winters become milder. They are easy to mistake for House Wrens, but they are larger and have a more distinct white eyebrow. Plus, they are much more likely to be in the Northeast in winter than House Wrens, which migrate south for the winter.

Top-25 List: 9,700 Sites Reporting

Rank	Species	*Average flock size*	*Percent of sites*	*Trend*
1	Chickadee*	2	92	
2	Dark-eyed Junco	5	90	
3	Northern Cardinal	3	88	
4	Downy Woodpecker	2	88	
5	Blue Jay	3	87	
6	Mourning Dove	5	85	
7	American Goldfinch	7	78	↘
8	White-breasted Nuthatch	1	76	↘
9	House Finch	4	76	
10	Red-bellied Woodpecker	1	70	
11	Tufted Titmouse	2	64	
12	American Robin	3	62	
13	House Sparrow	8	61	
14	European Starling	6	60	
15	Hairy Woodpecker	1	59	
16	Carolina Wren	1	47	
17	American Crow	3	46	
18	Song Sparrow	2	46	
19	White-throated Sparrow	3	44	
20	Red-winged Blackbird	5	44	
21	Common Grackle	6	44	
22	Brown-headed Cowbird	4	30	
23	Eastern Bluebird	2	30	↗
24	Purple Finch	3	28	
25	Northern Flicker	1	27	

*Chickadee combines Black-capped Chickadee and Carolina Chickadee.

A male Northern Cardinal enjoys some seeds in a wintery yard in Elizabeth, New Jersey.
Natalie Gregorio / Project FeederWatch



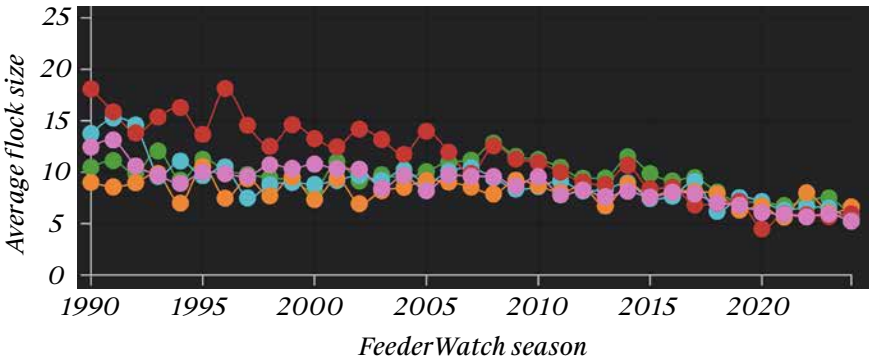
Carolina Wrens continue to spread to new sites in the Northeast, likely because of increasingly mild winters, perhaps helped by supplementary food.

Southeast Region

Top-25 List: 2,348 Sites Reporting

Rank	Species	*Average flock size*	*Percent of sites*	*Trend*
1	Northern Cardinal	3	93	
2	Carolina Chickadee	2	84	
3	Carolina Wren	1	77	
4	House Finch	3	76	
5	Mourning Dove	4	74	↘
6	Tufted Titmouse	2	72	↘
7	Blue Jay	2	69	↘
8	Red-bellied Woodpecker	1	67	↘
9	Downy Woodpecker	1	65	
10	American Goldfinch	6	61	↘↘
11	Northern Mockingbird	1	57	↘
12	Yellow-rumped Warbler	2	52	
13	Eastern Bluebird	2	52	
14	Chipping Sparrow	6	50	
15	Dark-eyed Junco	4	48	↘
16	American Robin	3	47	↘
17	American Crow	3	42	
18	White-throated Sparrow	3	40	↘
19	Pine Warbler	2	38	
20	White-breasted Nuthatch	1	38	
21	Ruby-crowned Kinglet	1	35	↗
22	Brown-headed Cowbird	6	35	
23	House Sparrow	7	33	
24	Brown Thrasher	1	33	
25	Red-winged Blackbird	8	32	↘

Average Flock Sizes for American Goldfinch



American Goldfinches are showing slow but steady declines in their average flock size across their range, Southeast (red), Northeast (orange), Central (green), Southwest (pink), and Northwest (blue).

Folks in the Southeast region reported some great species last season. One of our favorites is the American Goldfinch, a gorgeous species in which males change their plumage from dull tan in winter to bright yellow in summer. Although they are one of the top species in the Southeast, ranking #10 and visiting 61% of sites last season, their numbers have been on a slow and steady decline for decades. This decline is not obvious if you look at how often they are seen at sites, but it is obvious if you look at the average flock size when they are seen. Exactly why goldfinches are in decline is not known, but it is important that we continue to document their population change over time.

Another small feeder visitor that is common in the Southeast but that isn't often thought of as a winter bird is the Yellow-rumped Warbler. We often think of warblers as part of a spring and summer cohort of species, showing up when the weather warms and the insects abound. Yellow-rumped Warblers are migrants, but they don't travel as far as many other species, spending their winters in North America rather than heading all the way to Central or South America like many of the other warbler species. Part of why they can stay farther north is because they can digest winter berries that other warblers can't manage. Yellow-rumped Warblers will happily forage on insects that they find on vegetation in your yard, but they will also have a bit of suet, and maybe even a sunflower seed or two now and then.

A female Yellow-rumped Warbler enjoying some suet in Weddington, North Carolina.
Laura Marzola / Project FeederWatch

Northwest Region

Last season in the Northwest region we didn't see big changes compared to recent years. Pine Siskin counts were a bit lower than usual, as were European Starling counts, but otherwise most species were reported at similar proportions of sites. We expect Pine Siskins numbers to fluctuate from year to year because of their irruptive behavior, meaning that some years they show up in droves, and some years they are scarce. But European Starlings are showing declines for a different reason–their populations have been dropping for decades, as can be seen on the graph below showing average flock size in most FeederWatch regions. Many people do not like starlings because they are an introduced species and can compete with native species for nest cavities, but some research has found that despite competing for cavities, they don't have a big (or any) impact on populations of most native cavity nesting species.

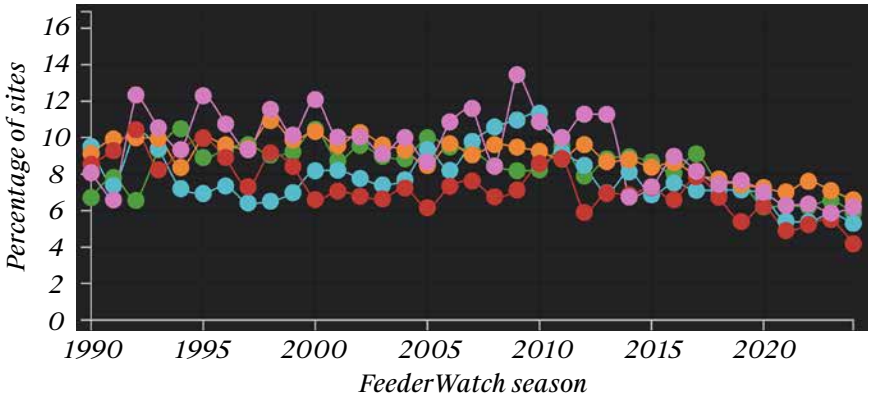
One species we always love to hear about from the Northwest every year is the Chestnut-backed Chickadee. This species is only found along the West Coast and primarily in the Pacific Northwest, so most FeederWatchers aren't lucky enough to have these rusty-colored chickadees visiting their feeders. It's a good thing we can read about one another's birds in *Winter Bird Highlights*. Chestnut-backed Chickadees have declined in past decades, but the cause of the decline is unknown, as is often the case with large scale population declines. However, they still have a charming presence at many Northwestern sites, feasting on suet and seeds in bird feeders as well as insects and wild berries that they find on their own.

A Chestnut-backed Chickadee perched in a cherry tree in British Columbia.
Hui Sim / Project FeederWatch

Top-25 List: 1,667 Sites Reporting

Rank	Species	*Average flock size*	*Percent of sites*	*Trend*
1	Dark-eyed Junco	9	87	
2	Black-capped Chickadee	3	83	
3	Northern Flicker	2	76	
4	House Finch	5	73	
5	Red-breasted Nuthatch	2	68	
6	Downy Woodpecker	1	60	
7	Song Sparrow	2	60	
8	Spotted Towhee	2	57	
9	American Robin	3	55	
10	Anna's Hummingbird	2	54	
11	Steller's Jay	3	53	
12	Chestnut-backed Chickadee	3	50	
13	Pine Siskin	7	45	↘
14	European Starling	5	42	↘
15	House Sparrow	9	41	
16	American Crow	3	41	
17	Varied Thrush	2	40	
18	American Goldfinch	5	38	
19	Bushtit	10	36	
20	Hairy Woodpecker	1	31	
21	Golden-crowned Sparrow	3	30	
22	Eurasian Collared-Dove	4	26	
23	Mourning Dove	4	26	
24	Fox Sparrow	2	25	
25	White-crowned Sparrow	3	25	

Percentage of Sites Reporting European Starlings

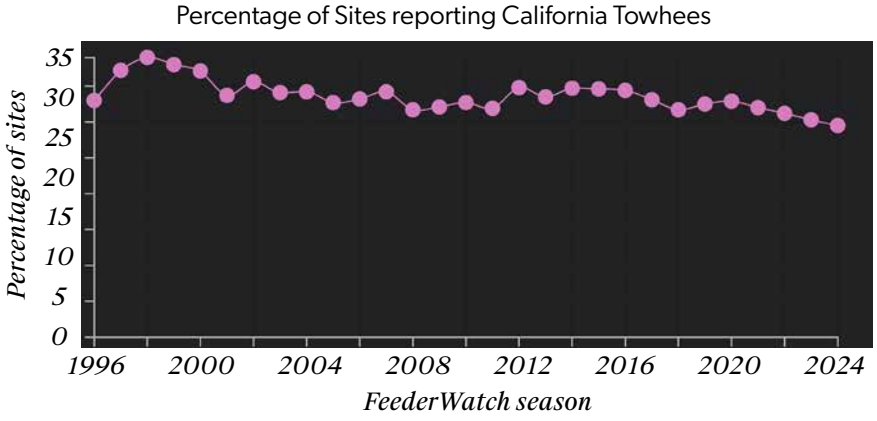


European Starlings are showing slow and steady declines in their average flock size across their North American range, Southeast (red), Northeast (orange), Central (green), Southwest (pink), and Northwest (blue).

Southwest Region

Top-25 List: 1,604 Sites Reporting

Rank	Species	*Average flock size*	*Percent of sites*	*Trend*
1	House Finch	6	87	
2	Dark-eyed Junco	5	72	↘
3	Mourning Dove	6	54	↘
4	Lesser Goldfinch	5	51	
5	White-crowned Sparrow	6	51	↘
6	Northern Flicker	2	47	
7	House Sparrow	7	44	↘
8	Anna's Hummingbird	2	43	
9	American Robin	3	41	↘↘
10	Eurasian Collared-Dove	3	40	
11	Spotted Towhee	2	39	
12	Downy Woodpecker	1	36	
13	White-breasted Nuthatch	1	36	
14	American Goldfinch	5	35	↘
15	Red-breasted Nuthatch	1	35	↗↗
16	American Crow	4	34	
17	Yellow-rumped Warbler	2	33	
18	Bushtit	7	33	
19	Black-capped Chickadee	2	31	
20	Pine Siskin	6	31	↘
21	California Towhee	2	30	
22	Oak/Juniper Titmouse	1	26	
23	European Starling	6	23	
24	Mountain Chickadee	2	23	
25	Bewick's Wren	1	22	



California Towhees have stable populations in the Southeast region, the only region in which they are found except for a tiny population in southern Oregon.

The Southwest region is a very special region because it is home to the most arid habitats in the U.S. It is amazing that some species common in the much wetter regions of North America are also common in the Southwest, such as House Finches, Dark-eyed Juncos, and Mourning Doves. That birds like House Finches can live in the hot Sonoran Desert and the cold Northeast shows the incredible adaptability of some bird species.

Other species on the Top-25 list for the Southwest region are almost exclusively found in that region, for example California Towhees and Oak and Juniper Titmice (previously considered one species, the Plain Titmouse). All three of these species have stable populations throughout their range, which is great news in this era of population declines for many species. California Towhees are a plain-looking brown bird with a bit of rufous coloration on their face, throat, and vent. They look extremely similar to another Southwestern species, the Canyon Towhee; however, Canyon Towhees live farther east and south. Another similar looking pair are the Oak and Juniper Titmice. These plain gray birds can also be separated by their range; Oak Titmice occur in California and along the coast while Juniper Titmice occur farther east and inland.

California Towhees have subtle but lovely markings on their faces.
Douglas Greenberg / Project FeederWatch

Central Region

In the Central region most of the Top 25 species were relatively stable compared to past years except for Red-breasted Nuthatches. This past season they showed a big decline at FeederWatch sites. The year before, they showed a big increase, and what this indicates is the irruptive nature of their movement patterns: some years they are abundant at feeders and some years they are scarce. These patterns reflect variation in natural food abundance in boreal forests in the North.

One beloved species that isn't showing a big change compared to recent years, but which over the long term has shown a big increase in the Central region, is the Red-bellied Woodpecker. These woodpeckers have been on the upswing in the Central and Northeastern regions for the past several decades, though the increase has somewhat leveled-off in recent years. Their range expansion is probably in part related to climate change and milder winters and may also be, in part, due to benefits they receive from supplementary feeders in winter. Their name may seem counter intuitive because the male's bright red cap is such a striking field mark, but they also have a red wash on their belly. Besides, they couldn't compete with the real Red-headed Woodpecker for that name because that species really does have an entirely red head.

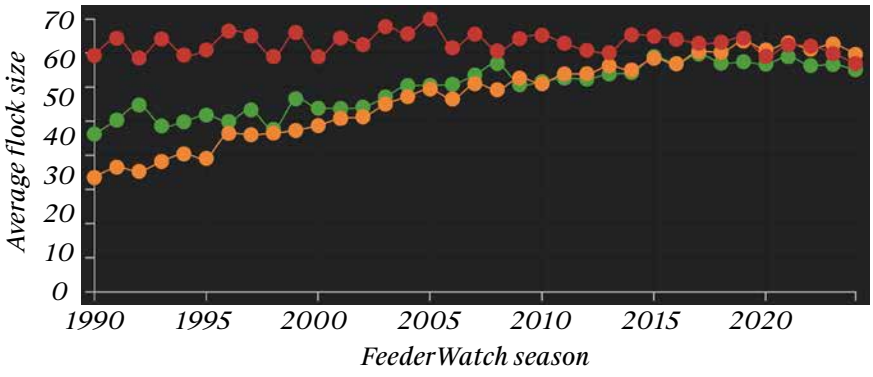
A male Red-bellied Woodpecker in Rollo, Missouri.
Gary Mueller / Project FeederWatch

Top-25 List: 1,210 Sites Reporting

Rank	Species	*Average flock size*	*Percent of sites*	*Trend*
1	Chickadee*	3	91	
2	Downy Woodpecker	2	89	
3	Dark-eyed Junco	6	88	
4	Blue Jay	3	86	
5	White-breasted Nuthatch	1	79	
6	House Finch	5	75	
7	House Sparrow	10	72	
8	Northern Cardinal	3	71	
9	American Goldfinch	6	67	↓
10	Red-bellied Woodpecker	1	65	
11	Hairy Woodpecker	1	62	
12	American Robin	3	52	
13	Mourning Dove	4	49	
14	European Starling	5	45	
15	American Crow	2	38	
16	Northern Flicker	1	38	
17	Pine Siskin	8	32	↑
18	Red-winged Blackbird	6	30	
19	White-throated Sparrow	3	29	
20	Common Grackle	5	29	
21	Tufted Titmouse	2	28	
22	Pileated Woodpecker	1	26	
23	Purple Finch	4	25	↓
24	Red-breasted Nuthatch	1	21	↓↓
25	Carolina Wren	1	21	

*Chickadee combines Black-capped Chickadee and Carolina Chickadee.

Percentage of Sites Reporting Red-bellied Woodpeckers



Red-bellied Woodpeckers have been on the rise in the Central (green) and Northeast (orange) regions for decades and have been stable and abundant in the Southeast (red).

Planting for Birds

Little Bluestem

By Lisa Bourgeois, Cornell Lab of Ornithology

Would you like to add an unusual plant to your landscape that is easy to grow, is low maintenance, has unique features, attracts birds, and contributes to a healthy ecosystem? A lovely ornamental grass called little bluestem could be just the plant you're looking for.

Little bluestem, *Schizachyrium scoparium*, is a perennial, warm-season grass that is native to eastern North America but is found in almost all of the U.S. and southern Canada. It makes a great addition to an existing garden to add texture or as part of a larger stand of mixed ornamental grasses. This grass can be used to stabilize soil and prevent erosion. It may be refreshing to hear that although deer sometimes enjoy foraging on this grass, the species is deer resistant.

It is not difficult to cultivate little bluestem, but the species does require some extra consideration, particularly if it will be grown from seed. Many plants require that their seeds are subjected to a certain temperature range to break seed dormancy. Seeds of little bluestem fall into this category and should be given a pre-treatment called cold stratification to ensure higher rates of germination. The simplest way to prepare the seeds for germination is to sow them directly into the ground at the *beginning of the growing season,* approximately two to four weeks before the average last spring frost in your area. Alternatively, seeding in the late fall at the *end of the growing season* (end of November to mid-December) can prepare the seeds for germination as they lay dormant all winter. This approach can cause germination to begin earlier in the spring leading to a more mature plant when summer temperatures are at their highest. Little bluestem can also be purchased in pots at garden centers or through online nurseries. Buying established plants makes it easier to add this species to an existing garden.

Cultivation of little bluestem requires a relatively low amount of time, resources, and horticultural skill to produce a robust and attractive addition to a FeederWatch site. Choose a location for this plant that receives as many hours of full sun as possible. Because little bluestem is botanically a "warm season" grass, this species is well adapted to prosper under hot conditions. Due to the large geographic range this plant inhabits, significant variation in color, flowering, clump size, and height can occur. Little bluestem grows to a height of 1.5 to 5 feet at maturity, about 2 years after planting from seed. It is tolerant of a wide range of soil types, including infertile soil and heavy clay, but it cannot handle wetlands or areas with poor drainage. Little bluestem prefers to have low moisture in the soil and is quite drought-resistant making this plant a great choice for locations where water use is restricted. When water is needed, it is best to water at the base of stems, thoroughly but briefly, while keeping water off of the upper part of stems, and to water no more than once a week.

Little bluestem.
Dan Keck / Wikimedia Commons

New growth, which begins in late spring and continues throughout the summer, tends to appear bluish. As temperatures decrease toward the end of summer and into fall, the stems begin changing to reddish-brown before the plant starts to flower. Fuzzy seed tufts appear in autumn and persist into winter, providing habitat and sustenance for birds and other animals throughout winter.

Little bluestem is very attractive to a wide variety of wildlife during different times of the year by providing food, nesting sites, and shelter. For example, bluebirds, Field Sparrows, American Tree Sparrows, Dark-eyed Juncos, other small animals eat the seeds during winter. In addition, insects such as bees, butterflies, and moths benefit from this plant. Most native bees overwinter in stems, in wood, or in the ground. Little bluestem provides nesting habitat for these bees with its stems that last through the winter months. Similarly, several butterfly species use little bluestem as a larval host for their offspring, including Dusted Skipper, Indian Skipper, Crossline Skipper, and Ottoe Skipper.

It can be a challenge to find plants that work well in the home garden that are not a burden to cultivate. Rarer yet do these garden plants fill a unique ecological niche to a variety of wildlife. Little bluestem is an excellent case of simplicity and sustenance that our feathered friends will come back to time and time again.

FeederWatcher Stories and Photos

When FeederWatchers submit counts through the Your Data section of the FeederWatch website, they are invited to submit stories in response to monthly prompts and be entered in a random drawing to win prizes. We posted all the winners at feederwatch.org/blog, but we received so many great responses that we wanted to share a few more.

Eastern Bluebird in Tucker, Georgia.
Pete Followill / Project FeederWatch

Planting for Goldfinches

I signed up for feederwatch because I enjoy watching the birds in my garden. I specifically grow plants that feed my favorite bird—goldfinches, which are one of the few birds that eat seeds year-round. I enjoy watching them harvest columbine, dandelion, cosmos, and sunflower seeds from my office windows all summer. I planted New England aster and goldenrod below the dining room window to feed them during the fall and winter.

—Adora Elliot, Webster Groves, Missouri

Dark-eyed Junco in Fairfax, California.
Anita Toney / Project FeederWatch

Growing More Familiar

What I appreciate most about FeederWatch is the surprises that come when I focus my attention with more care. We were delighted to discover a Ruby-crowned Kinglet one time, and even more excited to be visited by a Rose-breasted Grosbeak during spring migration. Had we not been watching with intent, we would have missed those birds!

This focused attention also gives us time to consider the behavior of the birds and to become better acquainted with their personalities. The House Finches perch and munch for a long time, while the chickadees and titmice flit back and forth from the feeder to their respective caches. And just as I become more familiar with the birds, the increased frequency of refilling the feeder makes me wonder if they are more familiar with me as well. Once last winter, an impatient Tufted Titmouse flew directly at me, calling their salty, "Mwerp mwerp mwerp mwerp mwerp" as they flew barely above my head into the tree behind me, where they continued to chide me for taking so long. Deepening these relationships with our wild neighbors adds great richness to our lives.

—Kristin Marsh Shepard, Asheville, North Carolina