

N.H. COVID-19 update: More signs Thursday that the recent decline in COVID may be leveling off, as both the number of new cases and hospitalizations has barely improved all week. Dartmouth College says its recent outbreak may have been spurred by new, more contagious variants of the virus. For New Hampshire numbers and news on the pandemic, including details about vaccines and getting a vaccination, click through.

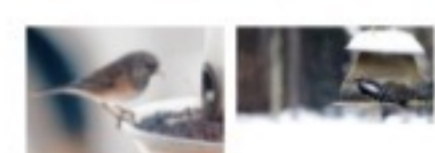
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Prepping for winter



A female junco bird eats from a feeder. Juncos are considered one of the first harbingers of winter, arriving soon after the temperature drops. AP



By DAWN COUTU For the Monitor

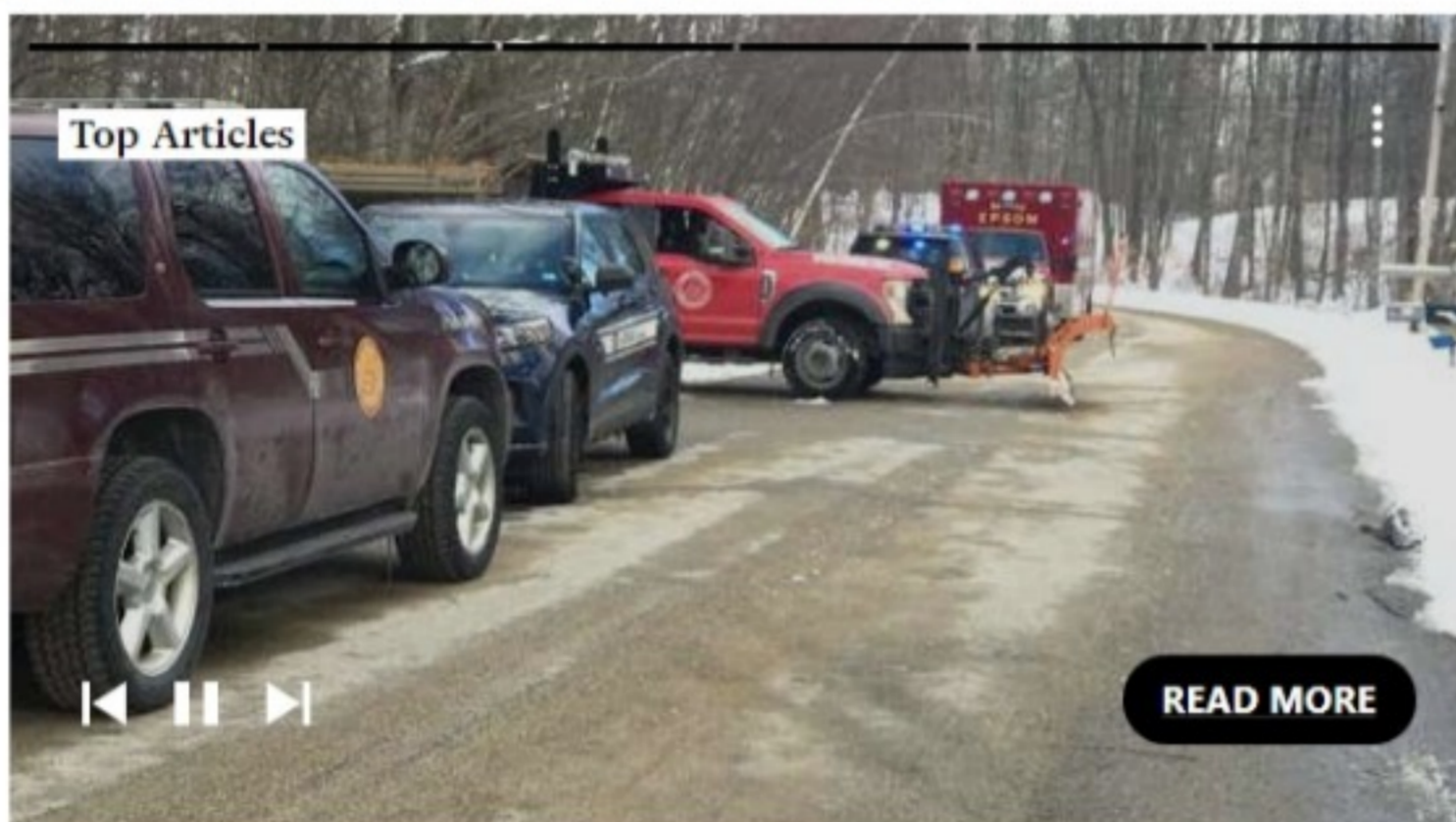
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"The great news in backyard birding is that the chickadees are already appearing at local feeders in good numbers!" said Nancy Schofield, a bird feeding specialist at Duncraft.

"We can always count on the Dark-eyed Juncos, the first harbingers of winter to arrive as soon as the temperatures drop. Both birds – and many other winter foragers – rely on sunflower seeds, peanuts, suet and other specialty blends we carry at Duncraft," said Schofield. "Now is the time to plan your winter feeding/watering habitat, and we are here to help you!"

What birds can we expect to see this winter

This year, look for chickadees, cardinals, jays, Tufted Titmice, nuthatches, woodpeckers and even bluebirds. Last year, a surprising amount of locals said they were seeing bluebirds at their feeders for the first time ever ... in winter. Bluebirds are considered a non-migratory species and are known to travel short distances to seek abundant food sources. This means you can attract bluebirds to your yard year-round by offering mealworms, their favorite food, and shelter.



What to feed when the cold weather sets in

If you were to pick one seed to feed the majority of your birds this winter, let it be black oil sunflower seed. It's the number one seed most birds prefer to eat and it attracts the greatest variety of birds. Many birds also prefer to eat high-energy suet cakes during cold weather. On bitter cold nights, it's common for birds to lose 10 percent of their body weight. Nutritious sunflower seed and suet are full of fat and calories, which are essential for your birds to store fat and survive bitter cold nights.

Offer water to attract more birds

In the same way you and I need water to drink and stay hydrated to function properly, so do the birds. They need water to drink and preen all year, even during freezing cold weather. Preening is important for birds to keep their feathers in top flight condition, allowing birds to escape from a predator's grasp at a moment's notice. Offer ice-free water for your birds in a heated birdbath to prevent the water from freezing over, even on the coldest days.

Provide shelter for birds in your yard

It's critical to provide shelter for any overwintering birds to protect them from our harsh New England winters. Roosting boxes allow a variety of birds to huddle together for warmth to conserve energy, while placing the birds out of reach from predators and icy cold winds.

Roosting boxes are different from birdhouses in that they're designed to be draft-free and often include a ladder for up to six birds to huddle together for warmth. Convertible roosting boxes can also be changed into birdhouses for the spring, which is convenient when you're attracting birds year-round. It's worth noting, unlike other species, bluebirds prefer to roost with other bluebirds. A bluebird winter roosting box allows a dozen bluebirds or more to huddle together, fanned out, for warmth at the bottom.



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By providing shelter for your birds this winter, it gives them the opportunity to become familiar with their surroundings. This increases the likelihood these same birds may nest nearby, once breeding season starts in the spring. They may also be one of the first species to breed. Before you know it, you'll be celebrating spring by watching the baby birds fledge in your own backyard.

You can start now by providing food, water and shelter for your birds this coming winter.

(Dawn Coutu is the copywriter at Duncraft and writes product descriptions about bird feeders and birdhouses for their website and biannual catalog. Shop bird feeders, birdbaths, bird seed and more at duncraft.com or visit the store at 102 Fisherville Road.)

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