

Track and learn about winter birds during Project FeederWatch

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Kids and parents can help scientists and connect with nature by watching birds at backyard feeders during the annual Project FeederWatch program. During Project FeederWatch, people across the U.S. and Canada track and report the numbers and types of birds that flock to their bird feeders during the winter. The program started mid-November and continues until April 8, 2011, with registration through the end of the February.

Scientists at The [Cornell Lab of Ornithology](#) use this data to determine large-scale changes in bird populations. These fluctuations could be from climate change, habitat destruction, disease or other environmental factors.

“Scientists can’t be everywhere, so they rely on citizens to bring in data,” said Genna Knight, [Project FeederWatch](#) project assistant. “Scientists put together [research](#) on distribution and abundance of winter birds to keep an eye on which ones are shoring up, and which are beginning to decline.”

Last winter, 15,699 people registered; 415 were from North Carolina, with 242 reporting data. More than 300 North Carolinians have registered to participate so far this year.

Tracking birds for the project brings awareness and appreciation, Knight said.

People of all ages and skills levels participate in Project FeederWatch, including families with children, Knight said. As part of the \$15 registration fee that helps fund the program, participants receive a bird identification poster with common species for the Eastern and Western U.S.

“If young children don’t know what bird it is, they can use the poster and learn how to identify what comes to their feeder,” Knight said.

Bird watching builds connections to nature

Participating in Project FeederWatch can help children learn about birds, and feeding birds introduces children to nature, said Mark Johns, a certified wildlife biologist and program specialist at [Stevens Nature Center](#) at Hemlock Bluffs Nature Preserve in Cary.

Birds are active and colorful, so they hold children’s attention and make them ask questions, said Marti Kane, director of the [Centennial Campus Center for Wildlife Education](#) in Raleigh.

“Children are fascinated by birds. Since [birds] are mostly seen during the daytime, they provide the perfect opportunity to study wild critters that actually live here,”

Kane said. Putting feeders in a yard draws birds to where children can easily watch them, she says.

Parents can help children observe behavior and patterns as they watch the action at their feeders. Talk with children about where birds go, what they do when they aren't in your area, and what people can do to help them, said Mike DiFabio, park manager at [Little River Regional Park and Natural Area](#) in Rougemont.

North Carolina is a wintering ground for some birds that migrate from farther north, and some birds migrate from the state's mountains to the Piedmont area.

Conserving North Carolina's Piedmont habitat and providing food in a safe and healthy way gives migratory birds a chance to breed, DiFabio says. He recommends building connections between what children observe in their backyards and what happens on a larger scale with migration.

Feeding birds doesn't negatively impact their behavior

A [study published](#) in Current Biology in 2009 reported that feeding Central European blackcap warblers was impacting their migration and reproduction patterns, which opens a possibility of the population splitting into two species.

Johns, the certified wildlife biologist, said he thinks "it's a stretch" that feeding birds will cause evolutionary changes and "the long-term benefits [of people feeding birds] is having people care about birds. Nobody cares about something until they learn about it."

Feeding also won't encourage birds to stay longer in an area. "Leaving a feeder out isn't going to bother anything or change their pattern. Hormones drive birds to leave, not because of a feeder," Johns said.

So don't worry that feeding birds will negatively impact their health or the species. As long as **feeders are kept clean**, are located where birds can **easily fly to cover**, and **water is available**, experts encourage families and others to feed the birds. Feeding birds provides a direct connection for children to nature in your yard and helps scientists track the bigger picture of bird populations.

Sidebar/secondary article:

Helpful tips for feeding birds in your backyard

Make it comfortable for kids to watch birds by putting feeders where they are visible through a window, suggested Mike DiFabio, park manager at [Little River Regional Park and Natural Area](#) in Rougemont.

Also try to place a feeder near bushes or an evergreen shrub or tree so birds can flee from natural predators and hide, said Marti Kane, director of the [Centennial Campus Center for Wildlife Education](#) in Raleigh.

“Be sure they don’t have to cross too far across open areas to get to safety,” she says.

Variations in feeders include a tube feeder with multiple perches for different birds, to ones made out of a 2-liter drink bottle, and even a simple platform feeder with a pole in the ground and a tray on top. “The problem with a shelf feeder is squirrels can easily sit there and buffet all day long,” Di Fabio said.

To make it harder for squirrels to eat the birdseed, don’t hang feeders in or near a tree and put a predator guard underneath, said Mark Johns, a certified wildlife biologist and program specialist at [Stevens Nature Center](#) at Hemlock Bluffs Nature Preserve in Cary.

Type of food

You can use gourmet bird food, but a bag of black oil sunflower seeds is most common and attracts most birds that are in this area in the winter, Di Fabio said.

If you provide a mix of seeds, like safflower seed as well as black oil sunflower and niger or thistle seed, kids can watch with binoculars and see what birds like which types of food, Kane said. You can also mix in peanuts or corn.

Suet is another good choice, especially during the cooler months. You can buy suet, or make your own, DiFabio said. (Recipes are available on the Little River Regional Park Facebook page.) The standard homemade version of peanut butter and bird seed in a pinecone works, too.

Suets can attract possums or raccoons, according to Kane, which can bring diseases you don’t want around your children. Mammals will stay away from hot pepper suet cakes, however, which birds like.

Keep it clean

“Cleaning [a feeder] is very important, Johns said. Keep the feeder clean of bird poop, feathers, stuff from their feathers.”

Johns advises cleaning a feeder once a week using the following method:

- Use a weak bleach solution of about 1 capful bleach to 3 or 4 gallons of water.
- Soak the feeder for a few minutes and scrub with a brush.
- Let the feeder air dry or use a hair dryer.

Pay attention to whether a bird is acting unusually, like not moving as much or its eyes are sunken, since it may be a sign it is sick, Johns said. In that case, clean the feeder to try to stop the spread of germs.

Extra attractions

Water is essential. If you don't have a water source nearby, providing water makes your feeding area attractive, Di Fabio said. He suggested checking it when refilling the feeder and changing it if it isn't clean. Chip the ice away during cold spells.

"Plants, shrubs and trees that are beneficial for habitat, nesting and food help attract birds too," DiFabio said. Bushes with berries are especially attractive for birds.

Kane encourages people to continue feeding birds during the winter once they start. "At the beginning of the winter, there are probably natural food sources. But as you get to February and March, a lot of natural food sources have been depleted. So that's when it's especially important to feed birds," she said.

Sidebar: Other ways to help bird research

Project FeederWatch is one of the citizen science programs through the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. The [Great Backyard Bird Count](#), Feb. 18-21, 2011, is another opportunity for families to help scientists. During this annual event, people count and report birds during a four-day period. Citizen scientists can watch and count for as little as 15 minutes one day.

Citizen science, where the public observes and reports data, has "transformed science" for ornithology, says Pat Leonard, staff writer and spokesperson for The Cornell Lab of Ornithology. "How else could you gather that volume of data?" she asked.

The data gathered through Project FeederWatch and other citizen scientist projects like it goes into the [Avian Knowledge Network](#) database. "It's a huge pool of raw data available to people who want to ask questions," Leonard said.

Sidebar: Activities for Kids

Learning about birds encourages children to care about them and the environment. With young children, the goal is just "trying to plant the seed" through awareness, said Mark Johns, a certified wildlife biologist and program specialist at Stevens Nature Center at Hemlock Bluffs Nature Preserve in Cary. Older children can learn more about birds and their interrelationships.

Parent involvement is the best way to get children interested in birds, said Mike DiFabio, park manager at Little River Regional Park and Natural Area in Rougemont.

Here are some activities parents can encourage and do with children:

- Help kids learn to identify birds. Get a simple guide of Eastern birds. Johns recommends Sibley or Petersons guides.
- Encourage children to draw pictures of the birds they see or take notes and observe their behaviors. "There are always bullies at the feeders," Johns said.
- Note any relationships between birds at the feeder and weather, added Marti Kane, director of the Centennial Campus Center for Wildlife Education in Raleigh.
- Pay attention to what different birds like to eat by changing the feed or providing a variety of options, Kane suggested.
- Pull up website with pictures, listen to bird sounds on CD Rom and watch videos about birds, Johns said.
- Participate in bird-watching programs and bird-count activities and visit museums or nature centers, Johns added. (Check the Carolina Parent calendar of events for area nature programs and bird-related activities for families.)

WEB ONLY:

Other ways to help bird research

Project FeederWatch is one of the citizen science programs through the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. Other projects that people can participate in to observe and provide data that help scientists include:

[Great Backyard Bird Count](#), Feb. 18-21, 2011: Count and report birds during a four-day period. Citizen scientists can watch and count for as little as 15 minutes one day. Joint project with [Audubon](#) and [Bird Studies Canada](#).

[eBird](#): Record birds you see, keep track of your bird lists, and explore maps and graphs. Year-round bird checklist; provided with [Audubon](#).

[Celebrate Urban Birds](#): Watch birds for 10 minutes and send in the data. Year-round program promotes conservation through gardening, the arts and observation.

[NestWatch](#): Monitor nests and collect breeding data used to track North American breeding birds' reproduction during the spring and summer.

[NestCams](#) and CamClickr: Watch the nesting cycle and tag and classify breeding behaviors.

Additional resources

[BirdSleuth](#): A citizen science curriculum for middle school students based on inquiry.

[Little River Regional Park and Natural Area](#): 301 Little River Park Way, Rougemont, N.C. A bird trail, other trails, gardens, and nature programs. Park [Facebook page](#) has suet recipes and information about programs for children and families.

[North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission](#) and [Centennial Campus Center for Wildlife Education](#) N.C. State University's Centennial Campus: 1751 Varsity Dr., Raleigh, N.C. Exhibit hall, trails, rain garden and bird feeders with webcams.

[Town of Cary Stevens Nature Center at Hemlock Bluffs](#): 2616 Kildaire Farm Rd., Cary, N.C. Information about the nature center and a link to programs for families and children.

[Blue Jay Point Wake County Park](#): 3200 Pleasant Union Church Rd., Raleigh, N.C. Environmental education center, hiking trails, gardens, and programs for children and families, including ones about birds.