

Green Scene: Enjoying the Birds of Winter

by Elaine Golds

(published December 2, 2011 – *The TriCity News*)



A varied thrush, when on the ground, becomes well camouflaged among the fallen leaves.

Rob Bertrand photo.

With temperatures dipping low at night and the frosty weather upon us, it's time to put up bird feeders in areas where the bears are no longer roaming. Most bears should be safely hibernating by now but there are still reports of them in the Westwood Plateau area. The colder weather means birds must eat even more to keep warm during the long nights and face the additional challenge of very limited hours of daylight to search for food. Without a doubt, winter is a demanding time of the year for our local birds.

There has certainly been a transition in the birds at our backyard feeder in recent weeks. The number of juncos has increased considerably. In addition, we have several towhees and song sparrows hanging out in the shrubs in our yard. These birds spend much of their time on the ground searching through leaf litter for food but they have quickly discovered the sweet spot underneath our bird feeder. While smaller birds like chickadees are tidy eaters, Steller's jays tend to be sloppier and spill seeds as they eat which can create a temporary bounty of sunflower seeds on the ground below. As long as it is ground-feeding birds eating any spilled seeds, I am happy. However, too many seeds on the ground can attract unwanted animals such as rats. Thus, it's a good idea to keep areas under feeders clean and bring in any feeders at night that can be accessed

by rats...this will also remove a source of food in areas where bears might still be on nocturnal prowls. Protecting feeders with a baffle is another good way to keep rats away.

I especially enjoy the large winter groups of bushtits that visit our suet feeder on their daily rounds. They seem so purposeful and joyful in each others' company as they make their way through the neighborhood. Because birds need to remain agile for flying, they cannot afford to eat too much at one time and gain excessive weight. Thus, each day they must find a sufficient amount of food to get them through a cold night.

This time of year provides an opportunity to enjoy occasional glimpses of varied thrushes. These colourful birds appear in residential areas and parks in late fall when snow at higher elevations poses a challenge for them to find food on the forest floor. They are similar in size to robins (and like robins, are members of the thrush family) and blend in beautifully with the colour of fallen autumn leaves. Varied thrushes are not the only birds that descend from higher elevations this time of year. Families of dippers also move downstream each fall to find open water and salmon eggs on which to feast. Dippers have a most unusual foraging technique of diving into cold streams in search of aquatic insects and other tasty treats. However, their long melodious song reveals their true identity as songbirds.

An abundance of spawned-out salmon in local rivers also attracts a growing population of bald eagles at this time of year. They can sometimes be seen flying along the north shore mountains between the Harrison River and the Georgia Strait as they move from one river to another in search of salmon carcasses.

With the Christmas season approaching, it is also time for the annual Audubon Christmas Bird Count. This year, the local count will take place on Saturday, December 17. Conducted since 1900, this annual bird count now provides a valuable long-term census on winter bird populations throughout North America. Birds are recorded by volunteers within a 24 km diameter count circle which never changes in position once established. The local count circle has its centre in Pitt Meadows so, while all of Port Coquitlam is included, some of the western areas in Coquitlam and Port Moody are excluded.

The Christmas Bird Count on this side of the Pitt River is being organized by the Burke Mountain Naturalists. People who wish to participate should email BurkeMtsNats@gmail.com. Inexperienced birders will be teamed up with more knowledgeable people so it can be a good opportunity to learn more about local birds. Teams are assigned particular areas to cover and typically spend the morning recording all the birds they see.