

Winter Birding

By Grace Scalzo, Nature Photographer, Author, and Conservation Advocate

Winter. For us humans, it is the season of quiet, short days, and colder temperatures. Birds spend their lives focusing



Yellow-rumped Warbler, non-breeding plumage

on three activities: finding food, finding appropriate habitat and shelter, and reproducing. With few exceptions (some owls are winter nesters), during the winter months they are not concerned with reproduction. Their hormones are not flowing. Many have molted from their bright, attractive breeding plumage into much duller feathers. They are fairly quiet, and while you may hear a blue jay squawking, a robin cheeping, or a Cedar Waxwing flock buzzing around, they are not singing their beautiful songs that have one purpose, that being to attract a mate. They save those for springtime.

So why bird in the winter? Many species migrate, meaning they breed and nest in far northern regions, then fly south to spend the winter months in more temperate climates where they can find food. You may see birds in your area in the winter that are not around in the summer. For example, each winter, large flocks of Cedar Waxwings arrive in the Texas Hill Country where I live. Our habitat is prime for them in the cold months because of the abundance of one of their favorite foods, ashe juniper berries. They stay here for only a few months.



Cedar Waxwing with Ashe Juniper berry

Some shorebirds, including Purple Sandpipers, breed in the northern arctic regions. They migrate after nesting and raising their young and are found along the east coast from Quebec to South Carolina in the winter months. There is a subtle beauty



Purple Sandpiper

about their colors, and they frantically search to find morsels along the ocean edges, often hanging on precariously to icy rocks.



Long-tailed Duck, Winter Long Island, NY



Long-tailed Duck, Summer Alaska

Let's not forget about glorious ducks! One of my very favorite ducks, the Long-tailed Duck, looks totally different in winter plumage than in their breeding finery. They winter along the east coast and breed in Northern Canada and the Arctic, so unless you plan a long trip north, your opportunity to see them is in winter.

Some years are called "irruption years," meaning that a species normally found in one area in the winter has "irrupted" in another, a place where they are not typically found. Remember that I started by saying that birds focus on finding food? That is why they irrupt. This particular winter (2020-2021) is an irruption year for finches. Currently Pine Siskins are being seen in flocks in Texas, Evening Grosbeaks are being seen in Southern New York, and crossbills are on Long Island eating pine cone seeds. They are certainly still within expected ranges, but not usually seen in the numbers currently being reported. Of course, I cannot write an article about winter birding and irruption years



White-winged Crossbill

without mentioning the ever-popular Snowy Owl. Research points to a couple of reasons why they are seen in the southern portions of their range in some winters. One is that they have had a very successful breeding year that resulted in many young who are pushed out to go find their own food. The other is that their favorite food, lemmings, has suffered a decline in numbers, so the owls head south to find food.

I love seeing birds in a variety of settings. Winter can be one of the prettiest seasons. I photographed this Peregrine Falcon on Long Island one cold, windy day when it was beginning to snow.



Snowy Owl on a snow fence

I would likely not have seen this puffed-up pose on a warm day.



Peregrine Falcon, Arctic Race

How about a Snowy Owl in a snowstorm? Combine a beautiful bird, heavy wet snow, a good photography/birding friend, and memories were made that will last my lifetime. Birds need to eat in the winter and eat lots. When I lived on Long Island, I enjoyed finding interesting logs, standing them up in Christmas tree holders, and putting suet (I used homemade bark butter) on them. They attracted jays, woodpeckers, nuthatches, and titmice, to name a few. If you enjoy photographing birds, this can be a great way to attract them to your yard. If someone in your home is infirm, putting up a few feeders will lead to hours of birdwatching enjoyment. I have fond memories of my father watching birds at his feeders from the comfort of his chair once he could no longer venture outside. If you look closely at the Red-bellied Woodpecker picture, you will see that he is missing a foot. This healed injury did not appear to be hampering him, but it was satisfying to offer him some food in the winter and see him partake of it.



Red-bellied Woodpecker

Lastly, let's talk about travel. Visiting southern states in the winter will afford you the chance to see birds that might not be common where you live. This Roseate Spoonbill, Pyrrhuloxia, and

Great Kiskadee were new birds for me, all seen in South Texas on various winter trips. If you are interested in seeing some of the winter owls, head north to Minnesota, where great grays and other wonderful species are regulars. Take warm clothes!

I hope that this article and my photographs have inspired you to spend some time outside during the remaining winter months. The fresh air feels good. What can be more nourishing for our souls than time outdoors enjoying the peace and quiet that is found in nature? ❖



Roseate Spoonbill



Pyrrhuloxia



Great Kiskadee