

spotted on the hill

Those Poor Robins and Other Birds

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY PETER VANKEVICH

The two great snow falls of 2010 will no doubt replace the Blizzard of '96 as our most memorable winter in recent history. But the impact of these storms on birds is just as strong as it is on people.

In the midst of the Saturday storm, I was contacted by Margaret Starkey who told me that "hundreds of robins are filling the tree-tops on the grounds of the Library of Congress and the Supremes." Cornelia Strawser later wrote: "It is 10 A.M. the morning of the second big snow, near-blizzard conditions, and in the trees in front of my house

....there is a flock of many dozens of birds--almost all robins, with one or two mockingbirds mixed in. I have never seen so many robins together--where has the snow brought them out from? They look fat, but should we put food out for them? (I don't normally feed birds.)"

When Sunday morning broke with bright sunshine, I headed over to the House side of the Capitol grounds where I saw more than one hundred robins perched in trees and moving about. It made me wonder about how many birds in our area would make it through the next couple of weeks.

Heavy snowstorms cause problems for birds not only because of the freezing weather, but especially because the snow covers up needed food sources. During winter, birds in the northern areas tend to eat more seeds since insects and worms are in short supply. Some species like the Eastern Phoebe and Yellow-rumped Warbler seasonally



change their diets from insects to seeds and berries as the temperatures get colder. Robins also switch from primarily earthworms in summer to fruits and berries that are present on crab apple, red cedar and American holly trees in winter. Robins are not your stereotypical migratory birds. Because they can withstand cold temperatures, they are more nomadic in winter moving about in search of food rather than balmy weather and this time of the year will flock in large numbers, irrespective of snowstorms. Birds in cold weather sometimes appear fatter because they puff up their feathers to create air pockets to retain warmth. The chances of most of these robins surviving, therefore, are probably pretty high. Nonmigratory species may not fare as well.

In a recent column, I noted an article published in the Auk in 1923 by Alexander Wetmore about the very cold winter of 1917-1918 and its negative impact on Carolina Wrens, a nonmigratory

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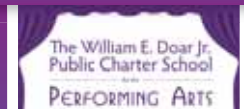
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bird, resulting in a great reduction of these birds in the DC area. He observed that it took several years before the species rebounded to its previous levels. Birds such as Dark-eyed Juncos and Song Sparrows that feed on seeds on the ground and low lying bushes could also have difficulties but fare better because they are short distance migrants and may move to areas where food supplies are better.

So what can someone do to help birds during a major snowstorm? In addition to keeping birdfeeders well-stocked, one technique I tried dates back to that January 1996 snow storm when I was living on the block of 13th and E Streets, SE. I had a large bag of bird seed and started tossing it onto the snow of my nearly treeless backyard. The seeds created quite a contrast from the pure white background. Within an hour or so, birds started to appear.

At first, it was the frantic neighborhood House Sparrows and European Starlings. They were soon joined by other birds - species I had never seen in my yard. I'm going from recollection, but the new ones I do remember were: Blue Jays, Carolina Chickadees, Tufted Titmice, Song Sparrows, White-throated Sparrow, Dark-eyed Juncos, Northern Cardinals, House Finch and American Goldfinch. If one were to try this,

to help several species include a mix of Black-oil sunflower seed, Nyjer/thistle seed, safflower and cracked corn. Additions could be peanuts, raisins, and slices of apples and oranges. Some have suggested taking suet and microwaving it until it is runny and smearing it on trees for woodpeckers. In the long-term, planting trees and shrubs that provide both cover and food will also help birds survive such stressful conditions.

There is perhaps something innate that makes us want to help those in need, including animals. If I recall, James Michener near the end of his novel, Chesapeake, portrayed one of the members of the Steeds clan aiding Canada Geese when the bay froze by tossing corn kernels onto the ice.

Some may argue that nature should take its course and mortality is part of the life cycle and humans should not interfere. Unfortunately, humans have far more interfered with the life cycle by the destruction of habitat and the introduction of pollutants into the eco-system that has caused the demise of millions of birds. A little help once in a while doesn't seem out of order. I think it's okay to dare to disturb the universe.

Feel free to send comments to Pete-vankevich@gmail.com. ★