

BY PRISCILLA FERAL

# ENVIRONMENT COMMITTEE UPDATE

Baltimore Oriole

## THE JOY OF BACKYARD BIRDS

Along with being an avid wildlife watcher, I'm an enthusiastic gardener, fixated on growing and nurturing plants, especially outside. How joyful it is when the two mesh, like last summer—while watering a row of hanging white geraniums with ivy, a sparrow hopped out of one of the planters and landed on a nearby lilac branch before scolding me for interfering.

I didn't see the sparrow's concealed nest until weeks later, after the parents and young had successfully moved on. I just stood there and marveled at its burrow-like construction.

Author and naturalist Stan Tekiela is equally fascinated by the lives and vocalizations of neighboring birds and devoted a beautifully photographed book to them called *"Backyard Birds: Welcomed Guests at Our Gardens and Feeders."* It's a winner.

Sixty million U.S. residents feed birds in their yards, which Tekiela says reconnects urban and suburbanites with nature. In his new book, he offers intriguing observations, such as how small birds in forests, who are hard to see, sing complex, loud songs to stand out and attract a mate.

Unfortunately, in the eastern half of the United States, backyard bird populations have declined by 50 to 70 percent, struggling to reproduce with nesting habitat destroyed from the development of homes and shopping malls.

Clearly, habitat preservation is paramount, and the good news is we can help restore it by creating our own wildlife refuges—halting the use of harmful pesticides and converting our backyards into inviting nesting and feeding areas.

## INSECTS TACKLED

Most birds are seasonal feeders.

Nuthatches, with extra-long claws on their hind toes, hitch down tree trunks head first as they aim for my bird and squirrel feeder – defying gravity.



Nuthatches actually spend lots of time searching for insect egg sacs during winter, which defies logic to me, but in freezing climates, insects lay thousands of eggs in sacs that survive the cold and hatch in spring.

We'd feel overwhelmed by insects if birds weren't always hunting and eating them on tree leaves, and wherever else they can be found. During spring and summer, birds like Northern Cardinals, Blue Jays and Rose-breasted Grosbeaks feed their babies as many insects as possible, stacking them in the corners of their beaks.

Most of our backyard birds are spring or early summer nesters, but Great Horned Owls – and we had at least two in Rowayton recently – and Bald Eagles are our earliest nesting birds – starting nest in January and February.

Spring is the time when most songs are heard.

Male Chipping Sparrows have one simple song and they perch high in trees and belt out a rapid chip note repeatedly – telling other males to stay out of their territory. In contrast, Brown Thrashers sing more than 100 different songs, twice repeating each phrase. Northern Cardinals and Northern Mocking-birds sing duets.



White-breasted Nuthatch

Blue Jays play a critical role in forest regeneration by dispersing and hiding oak tree acorns, which means some sprout into oak trees – outpacing squirrels as accomplished oak tree planters. Birds also keep forests healthy by consuming leaf-eating caterpillars and other bugs.

Female birds lay one egg per day or every other day, but parents don't protect the eggs until after the entire clutch is laid. Most backyard birds spend around two weeks in the nest after hatching before they are out and about in your yard learning how to fly. It's a vulnerable time for young birds, and Tekiela stresses the importance of leaving them alone, and keeping pets away from them for a couple of days. After the chicks learn how to fly, they will follow their parents around for two to three weeks.

As for migrators, bluebirds, robins, kestrels and geese are partial migrators. They often wait until the last minute – when the weather is cold or when food runs out – before heading south. Non-migrating birds such as Chickadees, Tufted Titmouse, and Woodpeckers are well suited to survive winter and they shift their diets to take advantage of seasonal food. They search for seeds, dried fruits that remain on trees during winter and overwintering insects and their eggs. If birds don't build a supply of fat that will fuel them all night long, they

won't survive.

Tekiela advises, “No matter how much you feed the birds, they won't become dependent on your food supply. Birds have wings and they know how to use them! They will continue to forage for wild food even though your feeder may be full. When your feeder runs dry, they simply search for food in the wild like they did before you started feeding them.”

In cold climates, birds with regular access to food have higher survival rates – 69 percent, and are in better shape in spring when birds nest.

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