

The Winter Bird-Friendly Schoolyard

Imagine it's a cold day in winter; snow covers the ground and a bitter wind is blowing. You're outside in bare feet, searching for food to give you the energy to make it through the below-zero night ahead. No well-stocked kitchen or warm bed beckons; all you have is a down jacket for to ward off the cold. Welcome to the world of a bird in winter in much of the United States!

How do such tiny creatures survive these challenging conditions? While the winter landscape may look bleak and barren to us, many plants offer a banquet of seeds, berries, and nuts to the avian population. Trees and shrubs also offer shelter from predators and winter weather. We can help our feathered friends by making sure our cultivated landscapes include lots of the plants that provide food through the winter months, along with plenty of places for birds to find cover. And we can set out feeders to provide birds with an ample buffet of high-energy food.

Winter is a great time to observe and study birds as they visit feeders or plants in the landscape and to learn about birds' life cycle, biology, and ecology. It's also a good time to take stock of the schoolyard landscape and come up with a plan to increase its bird-friendliness when spring planting time comes around.

Who Are the Winter Birds?

Discovering what birds you and your students are likely to see in the winter, both visiting feeders and out in the landscape, is a good starting point. The species encountered will depend on where you are in the country and the kind of habitat your schoolyard and nearby areas offers. Many birds migrate to milder winter areas where food and shelter resources are more plentiful. A helpful online resource is Project FeederWatch from the Cornell Lab of Ornithology. A bird identification field guide can also help students identify bird species and provide maps showing where each species is found in summer and winter.

Create a Bird-Friendly Landscape Plan

Birds need a steady supply of high energy food to give them the fuel they need to maintain their body temperature (which is often higher than ours!) They also need places that offer shelter from wind, rain, and snow and protection from predators. This is where we humans can help them out. We can fill our cultivated landscapes with plants that provide a bird banquet of seeds, fruits, and nuts through the winter months. We can also put foods like seeds and suet out in bird feeders to supplement what the landscape provides. And we can plant evergreens or densely branched deciduous shrubs to provide cover.

Have students do an inventory of existing plants on school grounds. What plants do they find that provide winter food for birds? Are there areas on school grounds where more bird-friendly planting can be added? What plants adapted to the conditions found in your school yard could be added to provide food or cover? Are there spots to install bird feeders to supplement natural food sources? Encourage your students to come up with a plan to make school grounds more welcoming to birds, not just in winter but all year round, and then brainstorm how to implement it. Here are some things to keep in mind as your students learn more about birds and set about creating a bird-friendly schoolyard.

- Include plants that fruit in both summer and fall. But with winter in mind, be sure to select some with fruits that persist on the plant through the winter. These will not only feed birds during the months of cold but will help to nourish migrant birds returning in early spring when other food sources are still scarce.
- Select primarily native plants adapted to the conditions at your site. While the fruits of some non-natives are enjoyed by birds, native plants have evolved along with the birds and are more likely to provide the best, most digestible nutrition for them.
- Leave seedheads standing in the garden over the winter. The dried seedheads of flowering perennials like black-eyed Susan (*Rudbeckia*) and purple coneflower (*Echinacea*) are Mother Nature's birdfeeders. Colorful black and yellow goldfinches and other seed-eaters will happily dine on the seeds of these and other flowers, including sunflowers, cosmos, zinnias, asters, goldenrod, and ornamental grasses.

- Set up a birdfeeder where students can easily observe the birds that come to eat. Place it about 10 feet from plants such as evergreens or dense shrubs that can provide birds with easily accessible cover from predators. But don't place the feeder closer than 10 feet to avoid giving neighborhood cats a hiding place from which they can wait to ambush visiting birds. Set up the feeder either within 3 feet of windows or more than 30 feet away from them. Close placement keeps birds taking off from feeders from gathering enough speed to be harmed if they do crash into a window, while placing feeders at least 30 feet away reduces the likelihood that they'll have a collision.
- Have students research the best kinds of feeders and food for the bird species that are likely to visit your feeders. Do some kinds of birds prefer certain kinds of food? Black oil sunflower seeds provide lots of energy and are enjoyed by many species of birds; goldfinches relish small black nyger (also called thistle) seeds; and woodpeckers will make a beeline to suet feeders. Some birds, such as song sparrows and towhees, rarely perch on elevated feeders, preferring to eat seeds on the ground or a flat low platform feeder.
- Build birdfeeders as a classroom project. These can be as simple as feeders made from recycled milk cartons to ones made from wood or other durable materials. Kits are readily available or check online for plans.
- To provide cover, choose a diversity of plants, both evergreen and deciduous, and of varying heights from small trees down to small shrubs and groundcovers. Even better, let an out-of-the-way area grow into a dense thicket.