

# Winter Bird Highlights


FROM PROJECT FEEDERWATCH 2011-12

The Cornell Lab of Ornithology



BIRD STUDIES  
ÉTUDES D'OISEAUX CANADA



**A**s we look back at the 2011–12 season of FeederWatch, we're also taking the opportunity to reflect on the first 25 years of the project. Much has changed in our backyard bird communities, and so it should. Each calendar year represents a generation for the species we see at our feeders. The birds visiting today may be 24 generations removed from the birds enjoyed and observed by the participants in FeederWatch during the inaugural season! The world is changing quickly, and birds are feeling the impact. Who would have thought that the gregarious and common Evening Grosbeak would disappear from our feeders? We certainly could not have imagined that the Eurasian Collared-Dove, a species barely found in North America when FeederWatch began, would spread from coast to coast and now be a dominant actor in the dramas that play out in backyards from Florida to Alaska. What are we likely to find during the next 25 years? Chances are, we don't yet even know the questions to ask. But we do know that birds will continue to move, that populations will fluctuate. Sitting back, observing our feeders, and watching what happens along the way is part of the joy of this journey that we take together as FeederWatchers. 

Acorn Woodpecker by Pam Koch.

Cover photo of Pileated Woodpecker by Bob Vuxinic.



*Focus on Citizen Science* is a publication highlighting the contributions of citizen scientists. This issue, *Winter Bird Highlights 2012*, is brought to you by Project FeederWatch, a research and education project of the Cornell Lab of Ornithology and Bird Studies Canada. Project FeederWatch is made possible by the efforts and support of thousands of citizen scientists.

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## ***Join Project FeederWatch!***

Anyone in the United States and Canada with an interest in birds and a feeder to watch is welcome to join. Help scientists monitor winter bird populations while you learn more about the birds in your neighborhood. To join, contact the FeederWatch office in your country.

### ***United States***

Cornell Lab of Ornithology

159 Sapsucker Woods Road

Ithaca, NY 14850

1-800-843-BIRD (2473)

[feederwatch@cornell.edu](mailto:feederwatch@cornell.edu)

[www.feederwatch.org](http://www.feederwatch.org)

### ***Canada***

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P.O. Box 160

Port Rowan, ON N0E 1M0

1-888-448-BIRD (2473)

[pfw@birdscanada.org](mailto:pfw@birdscanada.org)

[www.birds.canada.org/pfw.html](http://www.birds.canada.org/pfw.html)

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# Participant reflections



As part of our 25<sup>th</sup> season celebrations, we asked participants to share their favorite FeederWatch memories through our online forums. We have sprinkled some of the quotes we received throughout this publication.

In addition to memories submitted online, we received a letter from Vern Aune of Waukesha, Wisconsin. He wrote:

*“To honor the twenty-fifth season of Project FeederWatch, I have written a set of whimsical, partly ‘tongue-in-cheek’ verses, which are intended to illustrate a part of the avian diversity of our homesite. While the twenty-five species denoted by an asterisk (\*) comprise but a fraction of the total on our ‘Lot List,’ it nevertheless provides a representative sample of the results of the efforts of my wife, Judy, and myself to ‘birdify’ our yard over the past forty-five years. We think that the verses exemplify the fact that even in an urbanized setting it is readily possible to attract a wide variety of interesting birdlife.”*



RED-BELLIED WOODPECKER BY ERROL TASKIN

## Birdification Alliteration

By Vern Aune

Tufted Titmice\* twitter and Purple Finches\* flutter as Ruby-throated Hummers\* flutter by. Excited voices utter: “Hey! Look, up by the shutter—it’s a swallow-tail butterfly!

Red-bellied\* and Downies\*, of course, but Blue Jays\* and Yellow-rumped\*(!) also do it—get hooked on a foodstuff extraordinary and are happiest while gorging on suet.

Sharp-shins\* hurry, and little critters scurry, as passerines flee frantically for cover. Accipiters worry the chippies to a flurry, while Kestrels\* so stealthily hover.

The sunlight glimmers, and the cascades shimmer, as some warblers flit fitfully down; A Bay-breasted\* bathes and a Palm Warbler\* waves, while sipping is done by an Orange-crowned\*.

Some sparrows are Chipping\*; amphibians start pipping, as finches to feeders fly in. Chipmunks chatter, but, it doesn’t matter, we still hear birdsong above the din.

We hear a Phoebe\*, followed by a Pewee\*, as a Chick-a-dee\* sings: “Fee-Bee.” And then a Hermit Thrush\* creates a quiet hush, and guess who\* sings: “Drink-your-tea-e-e”?

An Olive-sided\* orders: “Quick, three beers,” and a Cardinal\* cheerily offers the crew three “Cheers!” A goat-sucker\* calls for violence toward “poor-Will,” then an Ovenbird\* calls continually for the “teacher.”

Scarlet Tanagers\* and towhees; Bell’s Vireos\* and Veeries\*, are easy—and not too hard. Vern and Judy say: “Come see these beauties, and Welcome!, to our yard!”

## A lasting legacy

FeederWatchers are generous folks, contributing their time, energy, and money to help us all better understand the birds. We simply could not track changes in bird populations without gifts above and beyond the annual participation fees, and we greatly appreciate the tremendous support. In fact, during the 2011–12 season, we received donations from 2,452 participants totaling more than US\$66,000. We are especially grateful to FeederWatcher Rita Fetter, a long-time FeederWatcher who recently passed away and left a \$10,000 gift to the project in her estate

plans. Rita made many lasting contributions to the project, including 106 FeederWatch counts—observations that will continue to be used to track changes in bird populations. Her thoughtful gift builds upon her legacy, showing her dedication to the birds and science. If you would like to make a gift or add FeederWatch to your estate plans, please visit the web sites listed below. Thank you for your support!

Canada: [www.birdscanada.org/support](http://www.birdscanada.org/support)

U.S.: [birds.cornell.giftplans.org/](http://birds.cornell.giftplans.org/)

# Taking a closer look at doves

BY ANNE MARIE JOHNSON, CORNELL LAB OF ORNITHOLOGY

**M**ourning Doves have long been one of the most common species seen at feeders in much of North America. Other species of doves are rapidly spreading across the continent, however, and observations from FeederWatchers are helping track the invasion and the impacts that these invaders are having on Mourning Doves and other less-common native species.

Eurasian Collared-Doves have spread at a remarkable rate—moving northwest from Florida to the Pacific coast in the last decade. The species was first spotted nesting in Florida in 1982, having presumably reached North America from the Bahamas where many individuals had been released. By 1992, the species reached Alabama, and then by 2002, a few individuals had reached Illinois and New Mexico. Now collared-doves inhabit much of the western U.S. and reach as far north and west as British Columbia and Alaska. Large numbers of collared-doves have yet to reach the northeastern U.S. or Canada east of Alberta, although we expect that to happen in the coming years.

Collared-doves can raise as many as six broods a year—the female can lay eggs while still attending to young in a previous nest. This prolific reproduction helps explain how they have been able to expand so quickly. Eurasian Collared-Doves prefer open fields and suburban areas and feed readily at backyard bird feeders, which also likely have assisted in their rapid expansion.

Since the start of the Eurasian Collared-Dove invasion, we have been watching to see if their rapid

expansion was having an effect on native dove species. A 2009 analysis of FeederWatch data in Florida found no evidence that collared-doves were squeezing out other doves. But the results may be different in other areas where food may be more limited in winter. Vernon Dayhoff, FeederWatching in Colorado Springs, Colorado, for the last 25 years, first started seeing Eurasian Collared-Doves at his feeders in 2011 and saw their impact immediately. He wrote, “A year ago they started coming one or two at a time. Now I see 16 at one time. They usually keep other birds away, including Western Scrub-Jays! I haven’t seen more than one or two Mourning Doves in my feeding area since the Eurasian Collared-Doves arrived.”

Similarly, FeederWatch data indicate a slight, long-term decline in Mourning Dove flock sizes in the Southeast and South Central regions (see page 10), but more analysis is needed to determine if the changes can be tied to the arrival of the Eurasian Collared-Dove.

Results are mixed elsewhere. This past spring, Kenneth Poole of Mimbres, New Mexico, wrote about his observations of dove interactions in his yard after noticing a difference between winter and summer: “I have observed over the course of several winters (if not longer) that the Eurasian Collared-Doves seem to coexist well in our feeding area with our other dove species—White-winged, Mourning, and Inca. There have been no signs of aggression. However, now that the breeding season has begun here, territorial disputes have been taking place between the White-winged Doves and the Eurasian Collared-Doves, and clearly the Eurasian Collared-Doves are the aggressors driving off the male White-winged Doves.”

Although not as dramatically as Eurasian Collared-Doves, White-winged Doves also have been on the move. Historically, White-winged Doves were found in

*We started with a pair of Eurasian Collared-Doves several years ago, and they have certainly multiplied here. Last week I reported 10 and was surprised today to see 11.*

Barbara Boyer, Bellevue, Idaho

Mexico, Central America, and the Caribbean, reaching north only as far as Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California. In recent years, FeederWatch participants have observed the species as far north as Colorado, Kansas, and even Nebraska, documenting the dove's northern expansion. Unlike Eurasian Collared-Doves, White-winged Doves prefer dense woodlands and shrubs, but they have adapted to more open and urban areas, particularly where there are large trees.

We will continue to look closely at the data for dove populations in the coming years to see if any more widespread shifts can be detected. Bird communities are indeed changing in backyards across the continent. We can't be certain what FeederWatchers will see 25 years from now, but we do know that continued observations will help us better understand and track changes as they happen. 📌

### African Collared-Dove

Eurasian Collared-Doves are sometimes confused with descendants of domesticated African Collared-Doves (*Streptopelia roseogrisea*). This dove is a common caged bird (often called a "ringed turtle-dove") that is rarely seen in the wild in North America. African Collared-Doves



ELENA PINTLIE

have a dark ring on the nape, similar to their Eurasian cousins, but the primary wing feathers are pale gray and the bird is smaller, close in size to a Mourning Dove.

## Distinguishing some common doves

The White-winged Dove, Mourning Dove, and Eurasian Collared-Dove can be distinguished from one another by their field marks. Each species also makes distinctive vocalizations.



PATRICIA JONES-MESTAS

### Eurasian Collared-Dove (*Streptopelia decaocto*)

- The largest of the three species, about 13" long
- Distinct black ring around the back of the neck
- Dark, gray-brown primary flight feathers (the longest feathers in the wing), contrasting with lighter colors on upper wing and back
- White bar at the end of tail is visible in flight
- A rapid, three-part cooing vocalization, "koo-KOO-kook"



PAM KOCH

### White-winged Dove (*Zenaida asiatica*)

- Similar in size to Mourning Dove (12"), but chunkier
- Large, white patch along the edge of the wing that is visible when the bird is at rest
- Small, black bar on the cheek
- Vocalizations include a variety of elaborate cooing sounds with multisyllable phrases



Download our guide to doves at [bit.ly/whichdove](http://bit.ly/whichdove)



JOSEPH KNOLL

### Mourning Dove (*Zenaida macroura*)

- The smallest of the three doves, about 12" long
- Distinctly long, tapered tail that comes to a point
- Black spots on the back
- Black cheek spot similar to White-winged Dove
- Vocalization is an emphatic "coo-oo" often followed by two or three louder "coos"
- Wings make a whistling sound when the bird takes flight

# Hawks!

*Counts increase at feeders in Canada*

BY KERRIE WILCOX, BIRD STUDIES CANADA

**N**othing adds more excitement to feeder watching than a visit by a raptor. Two raptors most commonly seen at feeders are the Sharp-shinned Hawk (*Accipiter striatus*) and the Cooper's Hawk (*Accipiter cooperii*).

Over the 25 years of FeederWatch, winter reports of these two predators have been increasing steadily. Some FeederWatchers are even lucky enough to observe the hunting behaviour of Sharp-shinned and Cooper's hawks at their feeders.

## *Persecution, then recovery*

Both Sharp-shinned Hawks and Cooper's Hawks were considered vermin and persecuted in the mid-1900s. Use of the dangerous insecticide DDT also contributed to lower numbers through direct toxicity and reduced prey availability. Today, with greater protection, these hawks are doing well. They are benefiting from warmer winters and some individuals are reducing or eliminating migratory movements. FeederWatch data suggest that more birds are staying in northern areas for the winter (see graphs). Like FeederWatch data, the recently published *State of Canada's Birds Report*, The Breeding Bird Survey, and the raptor migration counts all show positive trends.

Sharp-shinned Hawks were reported by 21.6% of all FeederWatchers in Canada in the 2011–12 season of FeederWatch, up from 9.8% reported in the first season of the project. Likewise, Cooper's Hawks reports have increased from just 4.4% in the first season to 19.8% in 2011–12.

## *Seed? No, thanks*

Although *Accipiter* hawks are commonly seen around or even sitting on feeders in winter, they are not interested in any of the food that FeederWatchers provide. The primary prey of Cooper's and Sharp-shinned hawks is other birds. Sharp-shinned Hawks are small, feisty accipiters that make short flights skimming close over bushes and through treetops, surprising potential victims and flushing them from cover. Another of the Sharp-shinned's hunting techniques is to hide within dense cover, and then dash out to attack unwary prey. Sharp-shinned Hawks are often seen hunting in parks, near houses, and around bird feeders.

Due to their larger size, Cooper's Hawks often pursue larger prey than Sharp-shinned Hawks. Mourning Doves are a favourite meal, and a Cooper's Hawk can eat one dove per day. While Cooper's Hawks hunt in a similar style to Sharp-shinned Hawks, they are more likely to search for prey from a hidden perch and they prefer to hunt in low, shrubby areas rather than in the treetops.

## A dangerous living

When pursuing prey, Cooper's Hawks may chase their target for several meters and then swing their feet and pelvis forward so that the talons strike the victim with maximum impact. When the feet strike, they are moving 15% faster than the pelvis, slamming into the prey at a speed of close to 10 meters per second. As a result, the prey may not be the only animal injured in these high-speed pursuits. One study of wintering hawks found that a whopping 14% of them had injuries.

## Predators can also be prey

Another recent study examining predatory behaviour in Sharp-shinned and Cooper's hawks found that Sharp-shinned Hawks began hunting after sunrise and returned to their roost before sunset, while the larger Cooper's Hawk started before sunrise and returned after sunset. The study suggested that Sharp-shinned Hawks avoid hunting



COOPER'S HAWK BY CYNTHIA MADSEN

under low light conditions in order to avoid being hunted themselves. Twelve of the 23 Sharp-shinned Hawks known to have died in the study were killed by owls!

## Feeders not a focus

Although we often see hawks near feeders, research suggests that hawks do not focus on "hotspots" where lots of prey concentrate, such as bird feeders, but instead they try to maintain unpredictability in their movements over time. Focusing on one feeder location would quickly result in depletion of the prey base and, hence, the longer-term quality of that feeding location for the hawk. Further, small birds may have an advantage near feeders where surprise attacks are unlikely because so many eyes are keeping watch for predators. While feeders are sources of abundant prey, individual birds generally benefit from group vigilance. Thus, the vulnerability of prey at feeders drops below that of prey elsewhere, and hawks might forgo hunting at feeders even though they are sources of abundant prey.

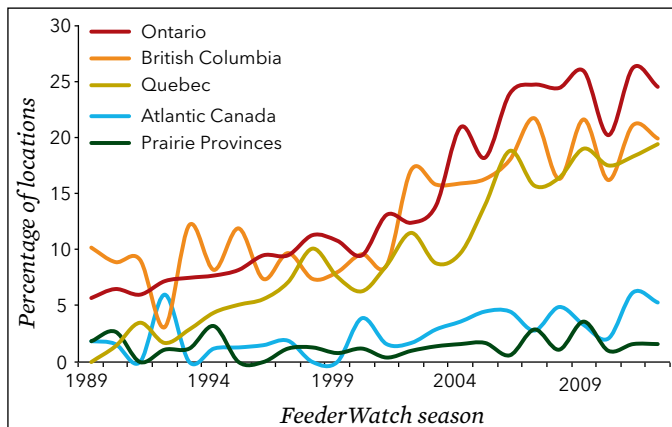
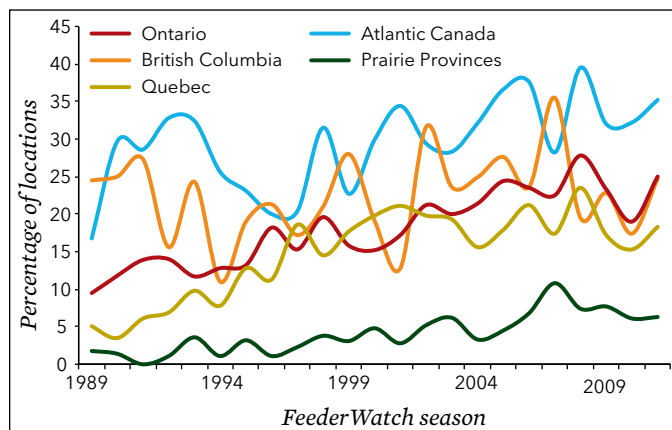
Although Cooper's and Sharp-shinned hawks frequently feed near human habitations, there is still a great deal to learn about their behaviour, distribution, and abundance. How are bird feeders and habitat alterations affecting the winter survival of these birds? How does the feeder-bird community change when an accipiter moves into the neighborhood? FeederWatch observations will help answer these questions and more.

We thank all the FeederWatchers who send us observations of their birds—including hawks! The more people who share observations from their own feeders, the more we can learn about the birds in our backyards.

If you would like assistance in distinguishing between these similar species, please send photos to the FeederWatch office in your country. For online tips and additional information on hawks, including sources referenced in this article, visit the "Tricky Bird Identification" pages on the web at [bit.ly/AccipiterIDTable](http://bit.ly/AccipiterIDTable).



Download our guide to Cooper's and Sharp-shinned hawks at [bit.ly/whichhawk](http://bit.ly/whichhawk)



Graphs: Percentage of FeederWatch locations reporting Sharp-shinned Hawks (above) and Cooper's Hawks (below) at least once during the season for Atlantic Canada, Quebec, Ontario, the prairie provinces, and British Columbia.

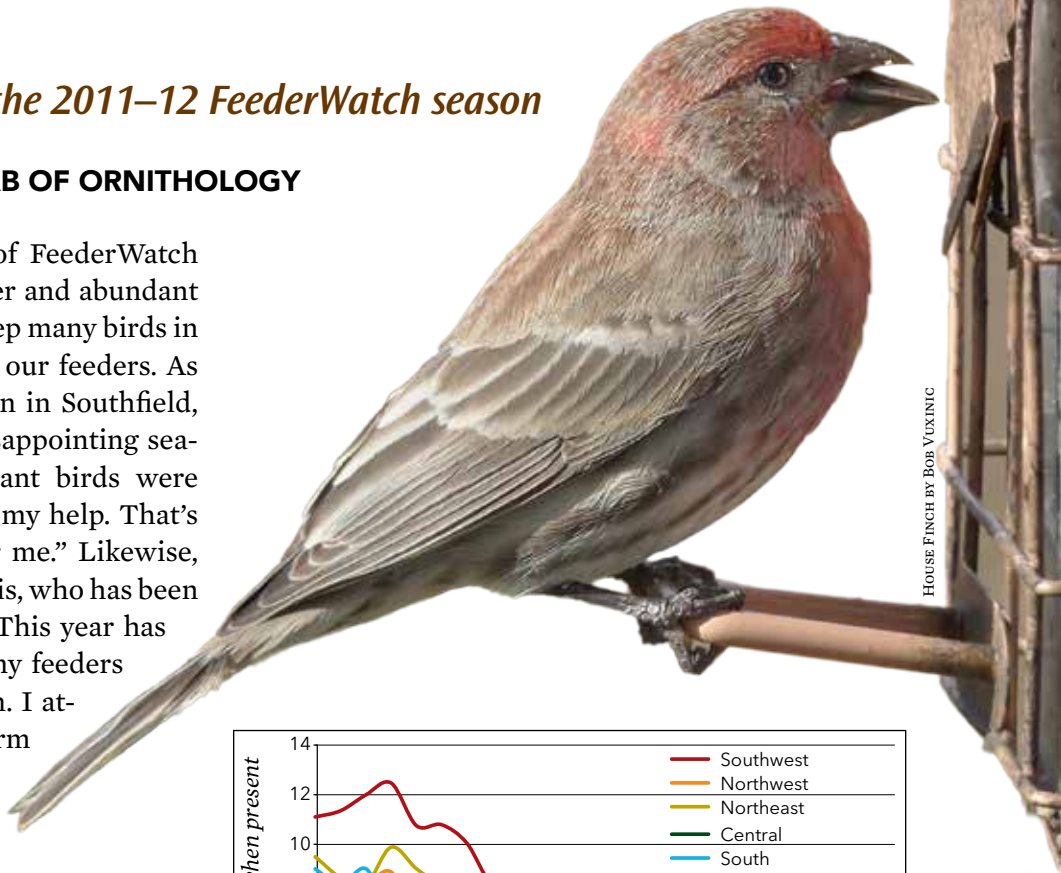
# Regional roundup

## Trends and highlights from the 2011–12 FeederWatch season

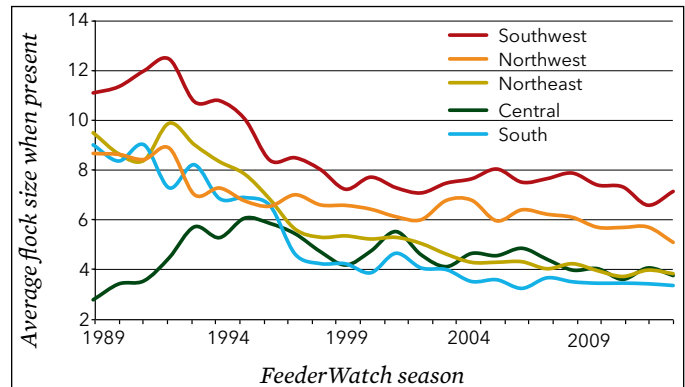
BY DAVID BONTER, CORNELL LAB OF ORNITHOLOGY

**W**e celebrated the 25<sup>th</sup> season of FeederWatch in 2011–12, but the warm winter and abundant natural food supplies conspired to keep many birds in the forests and fields and away from our feeders. As noted by FeederWatcher Diane Aman in Southfield, Michigan, “This was a somewhat disappointing season. I believe our mild winter meant birds were finding natural food and didn’t need my help. That’s good for them—but not as much for me.” Likewise, Miriam Huelsmann of Trenton, Illinois, who has been FeederWatching since 1988, noted, “This year has seen the lowest number of birds at my feeders since the first season of FeederWatch. I attribute that to the unseasonably warm winter and lack of snow cover.” Indeed, Diane and Miriam were not alone as the average number of birds reported per FeederWatch count across North America dropped to an all-time low last season.

Despite the relative inactivity at our feeders in the 2011–12 season, 25 years of observations from FeederWatchers have revealed that many species of common feeder birds are doing quite well. The regional summaries that follow focus largely on the longer-term perspective that allows us to better understand changes over time and space. We hope that you will continue on our journey as we embark on the next quarter-century of appreciation and careful observation of the natural world.



HOUSE FINCH BY BOB YUKING



FeederWatchers have witnessed dramatic changes in the fortunes of House Finches across the continent. Expanding populations prior to 1994 were reduced by the spread of *Mycoplasma gallisepticum*, the bacteria that causes House Finch Eye Disease. Average flock sizes have declined but are now holding steady.

## Rare Birds

**R**are bird highlights from the 2011–12 season included (left to right, top to bottom) a Gray-crowned Rosy-Finch in Booneville, New York; a Pine Warbler in Beaver Dam, Wisconsin; a Northern Cardinal in Melfort, Saskatchewan; and a Cape May Warbler in St. John’s, Newfoundland and Labrador. All confirmed rare bird reports with photos can be found in the Explore Data section of the FeederWatch web site.



JAY MCGOWAN



JACK R. BARTHOLMAI



SCOTT GREEN



GENE HEIZBERG



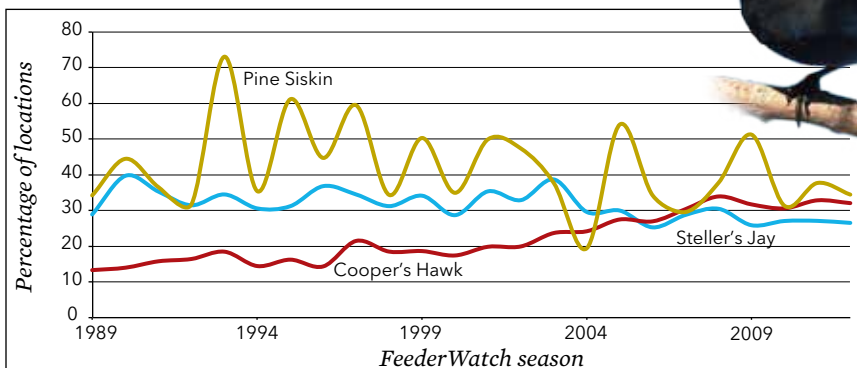


# Southwest & California Regions

## TOP-25 LIST: 795 SITES REPORTING

Rank		Species	Percentage of Sites	
2011-12	Average		2011-12	Average
1	1	House Finch	91	89
2	2	Dark-eyed Junco	79	81
3	4	Mourning Dove	70	64
4	8	American Robin	62	53
5	5	White-crowned Sparrow	61	59
6	4	Western Scrub-Jay	61	62
7	6	House Sparrow	58	59
8	19	Lesser Goldfinch	56	36
9	10	American Goldfinch	54	48
10	9	Northern Flicker	53	49
11	10	Anna's Hummingbird	52	49
12	12	Spotted Towhee	45	40
13	26	American Crow	39	24
14	30	Eurasian Collared-Dove	39	25
15	14	California Towhee	36	35
16	19	"Plain" Titmouse*	35	29
17	12	Pine Siskin	34	42
18	23	Downy Woodpecker	34	26
19	18	White-breasted Nuthatch	33	30
20	15	European Starling	33	33
21	28	Cooper's Hawk	32	22
22	30	Bushtit	31	21
23	24	Yellow-rumped Warbler	31	24
24	18	Steller's Jay	27	31
25	26	Black-capped Chickadee	27	23

\* "Plain" Titmouse includes Oak Titmouse and Juniper Titmouse

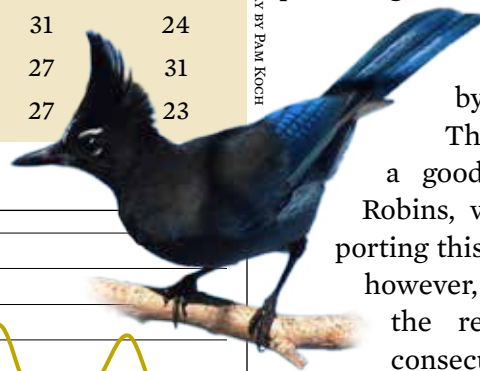


The percentage of sites reporting Cooper's Hawk is now double what it was when FeederWatch began. Pine Siskins occasionally move into the region in large numbers, with the last major movement occurring in 2008-09. Reports of Steller's Jay have declined since the mid-2000s.

Changes in populations of several species have provided long-term FeederWatchers in the Southwest with a different perspective in recent years. Perhaps the biggest change is the ongoing invasion of Eurasian Collared-Doves. It is hard to believe that this species, seen at 39% of sites in 2011-12, was essentially absent from the region when FeederWatch began. American Crows also are being seen more often: 39% of FeederWatchers hosted this species in 2011-12 compared with 11% in the 1980s. Lesser Goldfinches have expanded in recent years as well, seen at 54% of locations now compared to only 15% of locations in the 1980s. Goldfinches in general are doing well, with the percentage of sites reporting American Goldfinches increasing from 29% to 54% over the project's history. Downy Woodpeckers are being reported by twice as many FeederWatchers as when the project began. Bushtits also are showing a long-term increase and are now solidly in the regional Top 25.

On the downside, Golden-crowned Sparrows, once a perennial Top 25 species, are reported in smaller numbers and at fewer locations each year. While trends show an increase in the percentage of sites hosting Mourning Doves, average flock sizes have decreased by 2 birds per count.

The 2011-12 season was a good one for American Robins, with 62% of sites reporting this species. Pine Siskins, however, failed to irrupt into the region for the third consecutive season. House Sparrow numbers in the region indicate a slight decline, but numbers are far more stable in the Southwest than in other portions of North America. Likewise, European Starling populations, showing large declines elsewhere, appear to be stable in the Southwest.



STELLER'S JAY BY PAM KOCH

**N**orthern Cardinals have graced the feeders at more locations in the southeastern and south central states than any other species, holding the #1 spot on the regional list for the entire history of FeederWatch. More than 95% of sites have hosted cardinals each year since FeederWatch began. Populations of other species are undergoing long-term change in the region, however, with several species increasing over time and others declining (see table).

Mourning Dove has been the #2 species in the region in nearly all years, but a closer look at average flock sizes reveals a decline (see graph). Last winter was a poor year for American Goldfinch as relatively few FeederWatchers hosted this species and the decline in average flock size continued. Five fewer birds were reported per goldfinch flock in 2011-12 compared to the early years of FeederWatch (see graph).

House Finches were still expanding their range across the region when Project FeederWatch began. Despite a decrease in average flock sizes following the spread of the House Finch eye disease (see graph on page 8), more FeederWatchers (77%) host these finches today than in the early years of the project. Fewer than 40% of sites in the region hosted House Finches in the late 1980s.

**Long-term changes in percentage of sites hosting various species show increases in some species (green) and decreases in others (red).**

Species	Percentage of sites	
	1988-99	2000s
Yellow-bellied Sapsucker	19	26
Downy Woodpecker	54	68
American Crow	30	44
Carolina Wren	70	80
Eastern Bluebird	25	42
Northern Mockingbird	54	67
Common Grackle	54	45
House Sparrow	43	38

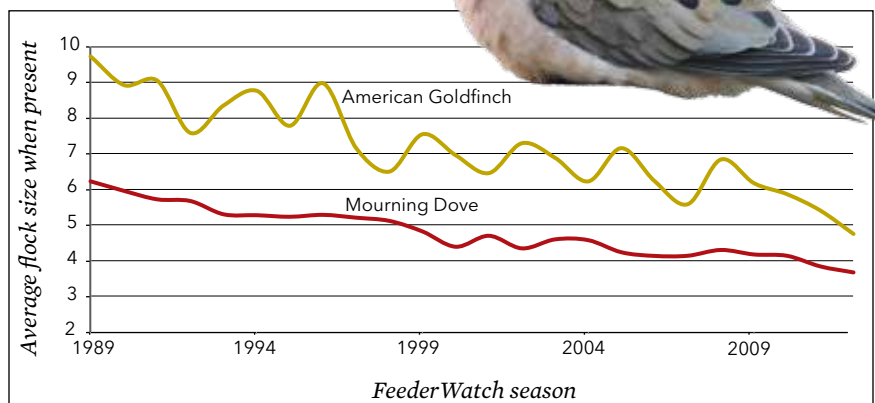
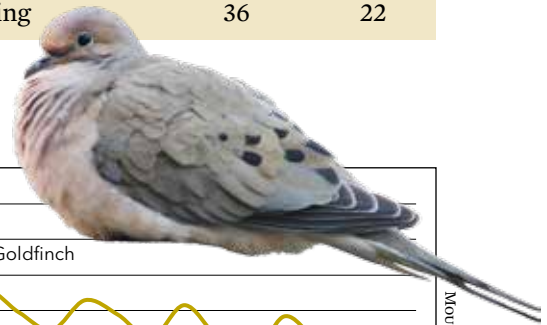
# Southeast & South-Central Regions



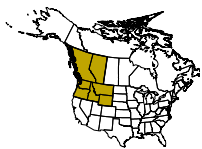
## TOP-25 LIST: 1,170 SITES REPORTING

Rank		Species	Percentage of Sites	
2011-12	Average		2011-12	Average
1	1	Northern Cardinal	97	97
2	2	Mourning Dove	89	90
3	5	Carolina Chickadee	89	80
4	4	American Goldfinch	81	84
5	5	Tufted Titmouse	80	83
6	7	Carolina Wren	79	76
7	10	House Finch	78	66
8	5	Blue Jay	75	83
9	8	Red-bellied Woodpecker	74	74
10	12	Northern Mockingbird	69	61
11	12	Downy Woodpecker	69	61
12	13	American Robin	64	60
13	10	Dark-eyed Junco	63	66
14	14	White-throated Sparrow	50	55
15	18	Chipping Sparrow	50	43
16	22	Yellow-rumped Warbler	47	37
17	25	Eastern Bluebird	46	34
18	22	American Crow	46	37
19	22	House Sparrow	43	40
20	20	Red-winged Blackbird	43	42
21	18	Brown-headed Cowbird	43	44
22	22	White-breasted Nuthatch	41	39
23	16	Common Grackle	37	49
24	21	"Rufous-sided" Towhee*	36	40
25	34	Cedar Waxwing	36	22

\* Combines Spotted Towhee and Eastern Towhee



Average flock sizes for Mourning Dove and American Goldfinch have declined.



## Pacific Northwest & Rocky Mountain Regions

### TOP-25 LIST: 936 SITES REPORTING

Rank		Species	Percentage of Sites	
2011-12	Average		2011-12	Average
1	1	Dark-eyed Junco	93	88
2	5	Northern Flicker	81	67
3	2	Black-capped Chickadee	79	80
4	4	House Finch	73	71
5	6	Pine Siskin	71	63
6	7	American Robin	69	60
7	10	Downy Woodpecker	63	54
8	8	Red-breasted Nuthatch	62	56
9	9	Song Sparrow	60	54
10	9	Spotted Towhee	59	54
11	11	European Starling	56	51
12	11	Steller's Jay	52	52
13	15	Chestnut-backed Chickadee	49	42
14	15	Varied Thrush	48	41
15	11	House Sparrow	48	52
16	17	American Goldfinch	42	35
17	36	Anna's Hummingbird	42	17
18	19	American Crow	41	31
19	26	Bushtit	36	22
20	21	Fox Sparrow	34	27
21	19	Hairy Woodpecker	34	30
22	22	Purple Finch	29	26
23	26	Golden-crowned Sparrow	29	21
24	20	Red-winged Blackbird	28	27
25	28	Mourning Dove	27	20

This Gray Catbird (below) was a rare winter find at the feeders of Linda Norman in New Denver, British Columbia. Catbirds winter in the southeastern states or in Central America.



LINDA NORMAN

Northern Flickers were seen at less than half of the feeders in the Pacific Northwest and Rocky Mountain regions in winter when FeederWatch began in 1987. Last season, this species was seen by more than 80% of FeederWatchers and reached #2 on the region's Top 25 list! Likewise, Anna's Hummingbirds have become far more common along the coast in winter over the past few decades. FeederWatchers reported these hummingbirds at 42% of sites in 2011-12, up from less than 10% of sites prior to the 2000-01 season.

Eurasian Collared-Doves are poised to rapidly expand into the region, increasing from 10% of sites in 2010-11 to 15% of sites in 2011-12. Slower, long-term increases are being recorded for several other species. American Robins are now seen by nearly 70% of FeederWatchers (up from less than 50% in the 1980s), and Chestnut-backed Chickadees were reported at more sites in 2011-12 than in any previous season. American Crows were reported by more than 40% of participants, up from less than 20% of participants reporting crows when the project began. Bushtits and Cooper's Hawks continue to be seen more often as well.

FeederWatchers recorded the biggest irruption of finches into the region in 2011-12 than in any year except 2001-02. Pine Siskins visited 71% of sites (79% in 2001-02), while Common Redpolls were recorded at 26% of sites (31% in 2001-02). Despite this movement of winter finches, Evening Grosbeaks were only recorded at 20% of sites last winter, far below the more than 50% of sites visited in the late 1980s.

House Sparrows are experiencing a slow decline in the percentage of locations hosting this species, and the average flock size is dropping.

Black-capped Chickadees were seen at as many locations as usual, but flock sizes dipped to an all-time low (2.8 birds) in 2011-12.

# Mid-Atlantic, East-Central, Northeast, Great Lakes, Allegheny, & Atlantic Canada Regions



**W**arm temperature, a lack of snow, and plentiful natural food supplies combined to frustrate FeederWatchers in much of the northeastern portion of the continent last winter. Average flock sizes for many common feeder birds—including Black-capped Chickadee, Tufted Titmouse, Dark-eyed Junco, Mourning Dove, Blue Jay, American Crow, and White-throated Sparrow—dropped to all-time lows at feeders across the region.

Despite the low numbers this season, more FeederWatchers are hosting woodpeckers each season. Red-bellied Woodpeckers are nearing the Top 10 most common feeder birds as the percentage of sites reporting this species has doubled since FeederWatch began. Hairy Woodpeckers are being seen more often, reported at 65% of sites in 2011-12 (up from 45% in the late 1980s). Northern Flicker reports also have increased over the history of the project, from 18% of sites to 28%.

American Robins were reported at 71% of sites in 2011-12, up from less than 40% of sites when FeederWatch began, and the species entered the Top 10 for the first time. Also increasing is the Wild Turkey, a species that has made an impressive comeback across much of the region. Turkeys were rarely reported to FeederWatch in the 1980s but were seen at 12% of sites in the region in 2011-12. The long-term range expansion of the Tufted Titmouse may be slowing as the percentage of sites hosting this species has been stable for the last decade. About 66% of sites reported titmice in recent years, up from 57% in the 1980s.

Irruptive species had a relatively poor showing in 2011-12 with below-average reports of Red-breasted Nuthatch and Common Redpoll. Only 4% of sites hosted Evening Grosbeak.

## TOP-25 LIST: 5,120 SITES REPORTING

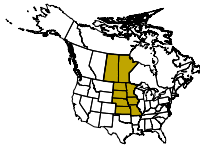
Rank		Species	Percentage of Sites	
2011-12	Average		2011-12	Average
1	1	Chickadee*	98	96
2	3	Dark-eyed Junco	94	91
3	2	Mourning Dove	93	92
4	5	Downy Woodpecker	92	88
5	4	Blue Jay	90	90
6	7	American Goldfinch	89	85
7	7	Northern Cardinal	87	85
8	8	White-breasted Nuthatch	82	77
9	9	House Finch	75	76
10	17	American Robin	71	50
11	16	Red-bellied Woodpecker	66	50
12	11	Tufted Titmouse	66	63
13	14	Hairy Woodpecker	66	54
14	11	European Starling	66	67
15	12	House Sparrow	64	64
16	16	American Crow	59	52
17	15	Common Grackle	55	52
18	17	Song Sparrow	52	48
19	20	Red-winged Blackbird	50	42
20	20	White-throated Sparrow	44	42
21	22	Brown-headed Cowbird	41	35
22	23	Carolina Wren	39	33
23	22	Purple Finch	37	36
24	22	American Tree Sparrow	35	37
25	30	Cooper's Hawk	32	19

\* Combines Black-capped Chickadee and Carolina Chickadee



This hummingbird (left) created quite a stir for the Gyllenhaal family in Oak Park, Illinois, last winter. First considered a possible Broad-tailed Hummingbird, additional views and genetic evidence confirmed it to be a Rufous Hummingbird. Any hummingbird is a rare find in the area in winter.

JERRY GOLDNER



# North-Central & Mid-Central Regions

## TOP-25 LIST: 642 SITES REPORTING

Rank		Species	Percentage of Sites	
2011-12	Average		2011-12	Average
1	1	Chickadee*	96	94
2	3	Dark-eyed Junco	93	90
3	3	Downy Woodpecker	91	89
4	3	Blue Jay	84	88
5	7	White-breasted Nuthatch	81	75
6	6	American Goldfinch	79	77
7	8	Northern Cardinal	73	71
8	10	House Finch	72	62
9	7	House Sparrow	71	76
10	10	Hairy Woodpecker	69	64
11	12	Red-bellied Woodpecker	64	56
12	13	American Robin	63	54
13	14	Mourning Dove	60	53
14	16	American Crow	48	44
15	12	European Starling	45	59
16	18	Northern Flicker	43	36
17	17	Purple Finch	40	40
18	16	Common Grackle	37	44
19	21	Red-winged Blackbird	35	30
20	21	Tufted Titmouse	30	30
21	27	Common Redpoll	28	24
22	28	Pileated Woodpecker	25	18
23	24	White-throated Sparrow	24	24
24	22	American Tree Sparrow	23	27
25	21	Red-breasted Nuthatch	23	32

\* Combines Black-capped Chickadee and Carolina Chickadee



ASA BLACK



ERROT TASHION

American Robins and Red-bellied Woodpeckers are seen more often in the region while European Starlings and House Sparrows are seen less often.



MARIA CORCACAS



CHRISTIANE DORNBRUCH

Consistency characterizes the top eight species in the central portion of the continent with little change noted in the past 25 years of observations. Looking beyond the top species, however, FeederWatchers have recorded considerable change since the project began.

House Finches were still invading the central U.S. and Canada in the late 1980s, and just over 10% of FeederWatchers reported this species in the early years. Today, more than 70% of participants host House Finches at their feeders, despite the devastating impact that the House Finch Eye Disease had on finch populations.

A number of species are far more common in the region in winter today than they were in the early years. American Robins, Mourning Doves, and Red-bellied Woodpeckers were reported by more than 60% of FeederWatchers in 2011-12, whereas only approximately 40% of participants saw these species in winter in the late 1980s. Cooper's and Sharp-shinned hawks were reported at twice as many locations in recent years (about 20%) than when the project began. The number of sites hosting Eastern Bluebirds in winter continues to increase.

Steady declines are noticeable for House Sparrows and European Starlings. The percentage of sites reporting starlings has dropped from near 70% in the 1980s to 45% in 2011-12, with average flock sizes dropping as well. House Sparrow flocks are dwindling from an average peak of 13 birds per flock to less than 8 birds per flock in recent years.

In 2011-12, American Tree Sparrow reports were lower than expected, perhaps due to a lack of snow cover that tends to bring this species to feeders. It was a relatively poor year for Pine Siskins in the region, with scattered reports coming mostly from eastern Iowa and Minnesota.

# Alaska & Northern Canada



**P**ine Grosbeaks had their best showing in FeederWatch history last season, seen at more than 70% of locations with the largest average flock sizes on record (8.1 birds). Downy Woodpeckers continued on their long-term increasing trend, reported at 59% of sites last season compared to only 31% of sites in the late 1980s. Sharp-shinned Hawk sightings are also on the rise as more than 25% of FeederWatchers reported these hawks near their feeding stations. Ten of the top 12 species were seen at an above-average number of loca-

## TOP-10 LIST: 54 SITES REPORTING

Rank			Percentage of Sites	
2011-12	Average	Species	2011-12	Average
1	1	Black-capped Chickadee	83	83
2	2	Common Redpoll	76	78
3	5	Pine Grosbeak	70	59
4	5	Boreal Chickadee	63	57
5	8	Hairy Woodpecker	63	50
6	5	Black-billed Magpie	59	55
7	6	Downy Woodpecker	59	53
8	9	Dark-eyed Junco	56	44
9	11	Common Raven	54	37
10	7	Red-breasted Nuthatch	52	50

tions in 2011–12, suggesting that last season was a good one for most FeederWatchers in the region. Although Dark-eyed Juncos were reported by a larger percentage of FeederWatchers, flock sizes were the lowest on record (4.9 birds compared to an average of 7.9).

## Do feeder halos keep House Sparrows at bay?

BY SUSAN NEWMAN, CORNELL LAB OF ORNITHOLOGY

**S**ome FeederWatchers are content to count any species that visit their feeders. Others, however, are plagued continually by so-called “pest” species, be they grackles, starlings, pigeons, or the ubiquitous House Sparrow. Although these birds can be interesting and attractive in their own way, they can act aggressively toward smaller and more timid species, and the non-native House Sparrow in particular doesn’t have a large fan club.

House Sparrows, native to Europe and Asia, were introduced to Brooklyn, New York, in 1851. By 1900, the species had already spread to the Rocky Mountains. With several more western introductions in the 1800s, House Sparrows soon spread across almost all of North America—only absent now in most of Alaska and Northern Canada.

House Sparrows spread quickly because of their adaptability in human-modified landscapes. These birds actually prefer to nest in man-made structures such as eaves and street lights, and they will feed both at bird feeders and from the ground. In fact, House Sparrows are almost exclusively found within the immediate vicinity of humans—they are generally absent from heavily wooded areas, grasslands, and deserts.

House Sparrows can sometimes discourage native birds from visiting feeders, and during the breeding season, they may oust native species from nest boxes. For these reasons, FeederWatchers who have been plagued by House Sparrows sometimes become frustrated by these little black-bibbed birds. One solution is to shy away from millet (a preferred food) and to sweep away any seed that accumulates below feeders. Modifying your feeders with “halos” may also distract the sparrow hoards.

The idea for feeder halos stems from techniques used to keep gulls away from landfills and reservoirs where wires are hung in the air to deter the unwanted birds. Researchers at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln applied this same technique to bird feeders in the hope that House Sparrows would react similarly to the gulls. The researchers found a significant re-



RANDY HARWOOD



*I work with adults who experience life with disabilities. Jeannie, who is legally blind, loved the idea of watching our bird feeder but seemed to have difficulty seeing the birds through the tinted glass. One day I pointed out a Purple Finch who was visiting the feeder. I asked Jeannie to come closer to the feeder and be as quiet as a mouse. When I pointed the bird out to her, she whispered, "I can see him! He's so pretty!" Judy, the other staff member and I couldn't help getting a little misty-eyed as we watched Jeannie truly connect with nature.*

**Carol Priestley, Bradford, Vermont**

PURPLE FINCH BY GARY LEE

## 2011–12 FeederWatch Season Statistics

**16,969**

**Participants**

**112,774**

**Checklists Submitted**


**5,850,136**

**Birds Reported**

duction in House Sparrow visits to the feeders in their study. The hypothesis behind the halo is that House Sparrows perceive the wires as a possible hindrance to rapid escape. Interestingly, the effect seems to be relatively species-specific. Other species such as finches, cardinals, and native sparrows are unperturbed by the wires. The effect may also have something to do with the angle at which different species approach feeders.

If you would like to discourage House Sparrows from your yard, you might try using a halo baffle (see illustration). You can buy one at a specialty bird-feeding store, or you could easily make one for your feeders. Start with a sturdy object—a baffle or a clothes hanger bent into a circle will do—and hang the ring above your feeder. Next, attach wires to dangle from the ring. Don't use fishing line as birds can easily become entangled; instead use something like hobby wire, which can be purchased at craft stores. Shinier wire may also be more effective, as visibility of the wire may play a role in keeping the sparrows away—the glittering of shiny wire could make it harder for the sparrows to determine where the wire is, and thus they may be more wary. Be sure to weight the wires with something like fishing weights, or fix the wires to the ground, in order to prevent entanglement. The distance between the wires is also important: space lines 30–60 cm (1–2 feet) apart for optimal results.

Be aware, however, that halo deterrents may become less effective over time. As with any obstacle, the

birds may learn to become more comfortable with the wires as time goes on. Researchers also found that the wires were not effective in deterring juvenile House Sparrows or breeding females, perhaps because juvenile birds are less wary of dangers and adult birds become more likely to take risks during breeding season in order to care for young. 



CAITLIN TURNER

## FeederWatch Memories

*I have been counting birds since the 1991–92 season. One day last year there were four Turkey Vultures on the ground near my bird bath. I was flabbergasted to see those huge birds in my yard! I won't forget that experience.*

**Frances Jernigan, Alexandria, Virginia**

*One of the highlights for me was seeing a group of Rusty Blackbirds frequent my feeder area for several weeks during the 2010–11 year. I felt very privileged to see these birds, as their numbers have been dropping so rapidly. I feel I have gained a tremendous amount of knowledge, as well as fun and relaxation, as I watched and recorded the birds for FeederWatch. It is a highlight of the winter months for me.*

**Chris Smith, Pretty Prairie, Kansas**

*I had an interesting experience a couple of winters ago. One morning in early January, I spotted a Northern Cardinal without a tail! He looked so strange! That cardinal stuck around for the winter and will always be etched in my mind.*

**John Bigham,  
New Paris,  
Ohio**

*During the 2010–11 season, three Baltimore Orioles spent their winter vacation with me for the first time, a female and two juvenile males. I dreamed of having an adult male choose my yard but had only been teased for a few minutes, as they passed through on their migrations. This winter I had two adult males and could not help but wonder if they were the same two juveniles from the previous year, remembering my southern hospitality. Off and on the numbers increased to 7, at times, and then 10—I was so excited. I'm not certain how many stayed around, but for the next couple of weeks, they were consuming a 32-ounce jar of grape jelly every five days.*

**Glenda Simmons,  
Tallahassee, Florida**

BALTIMORE ORIOLE BY GARY MUELLER



**Keep your camera handy!** As part of a new sponsorship, Bob's Red Mill will provide prizes for a season-long **Birdspotter Photo Contest**. We'll ask FeederWatchers to submit bird photos through the Lab's Facebook page. Weekly winners will be entered into the end-of-season contest, with the grand prize photographer winning a trip to Oregon for a cooking class with Bob Moore, founder of Bob's Red Mill!