

Wildwood Birds

Wildwood is an excellent habitat for a variety of birds. And best of all we have few nuisance birds like English sparrows, starlings and grackles. I have recorded the comings and goings of our Wildwood birds for some 25 years. I know that the male blue bird's arrival the last of March is an early harbinger of spring. I often wonder what they eat during the month after their arrival since we have snow storms through April and it freezes at night through May. They generally stay until serious cold sets in about mid November. Bluebirds do not migrate to warm southern states as many migratory birds do and a few may even winter at Wildwood. Apparently, most winter on the plains in southeastern Colorado and northern New Mexico.

Some of our more beneficial birds actually spend the winter at Wild wood. These year around residents are namely: white-breasted nuthatch, pigmy nuthatch, mountain and black capped chickadee, Clark's nutcracker, Steller's jay, hairy woodpecker, Williamson's sap sucker, northern flicker, a few house, rosy and Cassin's finches, pine siskins, towhees, sage sparrows and dark-eyed juncos. We also have a few great horned owls and ravens year-around.

Red crossbills (or pine grosbeaks) arrive very early in the spring in small flocks. The males turn quite red during their mating season as do the Cassin's finches. And occasionally we get the colorful evening grosbeaks during the spring. Oddly, we get a few robins in April while snow is still around and surely no worms are available. The little pine siskins, juncos and towhees are prevalent around the feeders during early spring also.

The summer bird feeder residents start arriving in May while it is still freezing at night and while occasional snowstorms are around. The broad tailed humming birds arrive just before it is safe to set out our humming bird feeders. We then have most of our bird population by mid June including: wrens, tree swallows, mud dauber swallows at the caretaker's, night hawks, yellow-rumped warblers, western king birds, Downey woodpeckers, common mourning doves, cow (black) birds and a few bats. The aggressive little rufous hummingbirds arrive very close to July 1, as if they have a calendar to go by. Note that it is important to take your humming bird feeders in at Labor Day to encourage these little guys to migrate before it freezes hard.

The bird bath can attract some rare visitors. Once in a while we have a beautiful western tanager visit the bird bath. There are generally about a dozen turkey vultures around. One visited our bird bath for a rare drink. We have observed a few magpies occasionally, as well as prairie falcons, Red tailed hawks and some years a couple of golden eagles. I have occasionally

seen a few bats just before dawn darting around the eaves where millers tend to congregate at night.

We love to watch the different birds and study their habits from our bay window where we can see the bird feeders and bird bath that I described in article 4. Some visit the bath exclusively. Some visit the feeder and others are ground feeders. Most of them favor black oil sunflower seeds. The ground feeders and chipmunks eat the millet and milo that the birds throw out of the feeder. One has to decide how much seeds we are willing to put out because we can attract a lot of birds. A flock of half dozen cowbirds and or finches plus the jays and chipmunks can put away a lot of food. I buy a bag of mixed wild bird feed and mix it with equal proportions or more of straight black oil sunflower seeds. I also experimented with numerous types of feeders. I settled on one that has an adjustable cantilevered perch that can be adjusted to any weight of birds that I want to feed at the same time. I set it so that any bird heavier than one finch will shut the feed off. It's amazing how soon they learn to take turns. I can accomplish several objectives by rationing the seeds in addition to cost:

1. I want to maintain my bird population by having a steady small food supply available during days and weeks when we are not at our summer home. This has proven to encourage them to nest close by.
2. I want to only supplement, not replace, the bird's natural food. I want them to depend on natural forage habits as much as possible.
3. I want to maximize the benefit of insect control. My reasoning is that a partially hungry bird will go look for more food, hopefully insects, but still hang around.

One of the hazards that we create by concentrating the birds around a feeding and bath area is that it makes a great target for predators. This is evidenced by seeing a patch of feathers occasionally. We have a few stray domestic cats, bob cats and hawks around. I have seen a few weasels from time to time. On occasion we have been visited by black bears. Faye and I actually got pictures this last summer of them getting into the feeder. See page 4. They did quite a bit of damage to our neighbor's seed and humming bird feeders. The only way to prevent their predation is to raise the feeders on a very strong steel pole to at least 10 feet or remove them for the dry "bear" season.

A number of years ago I was watching a lot of bird activity. Suddenly the activity stopped and the birds had just disappeared. It was so noticeable that I stepped out of the house to see what was going on. A peregrine (prairie) falcon was perched in a nearby tree. I have observed this several times over the years including once just last summer. Each type of bird has its own unique behavior pattern. Upon close observation, even some individual birds

have a unique behavior. For example some nut crackers will swoop straight down to the bird bath from a specific tall pine tree. One nut cracker will always tack downward between two trees 2 times and finally land on a particular limb about 10 feet up and 15 feet away before the final descent to the water. Babies have their own way of coaxing food from a parent with wings fluttering. You can observe parents teaching their young to drink. Jays don't like to bathe like bluebirds, robins and finches but they do occasionally. So it is particularly fun to watch a jay parent try to get a youngster to bath.

Night hawks are very unique birds. They eat high flying insects exclusively. We particularly like to watch them during warm evenings go into their controlled dives and listen for the loud swooshing sound created by the wind through their primary feathers. They build their nests directly on the ground on open rocky soil patches where the small pebbles are a mottled grey-brown in color. I have a particular patch that nearly every year has a nesting bird. They are so perfectly camouflaged that you have to almost step on the brooding mother before you see it. Then they limp off a little ways like they are severely injured. You can stay stock still and try to spot the nest. The small soil depression for the nest and mottled egg coloring is so camouflaged that it is extremely difficult to find even, though you are nearly standing on it.

Of course everyone enjoys the antics of the humming birds. Our grandkids can get them to sit on their fingers. The broadtails put on their courtship displays with very fast and aggressive dives. Things really get exciting when the aggressive little rufous humming birds appear and start chasing the broad tails around at blazing speeds.

I could go on and on for pages on the interesting and different behavior patterns. It is a big part of our wildwood experience. The more you get involved the more you see.

On a final note, nuthatches and chickadees are exceptionally beneficial birds, and they cause no damage as the woodpeckers sometimes do. They are easy to attract as secondary nesters with appropriate nest boxes similar to bluebird boxes. However it is critical to make the entrance holes 1 1/8" for chickadees and 1 1/4 "for white breasted nuthatches.. They are not as territorial as blue birds so placing and distribution of the boxes aren't as critical. They eat both seeds (black oil sunflower seeds are their favorite) and a healthy diet of beetles and other insects. I believe they are our best defense against the mountain pine beetle and other tree infestations. I have attached a good design for chickadees and nuthatches for your use. I also have a woodpecker nest box design layout if you are interested.

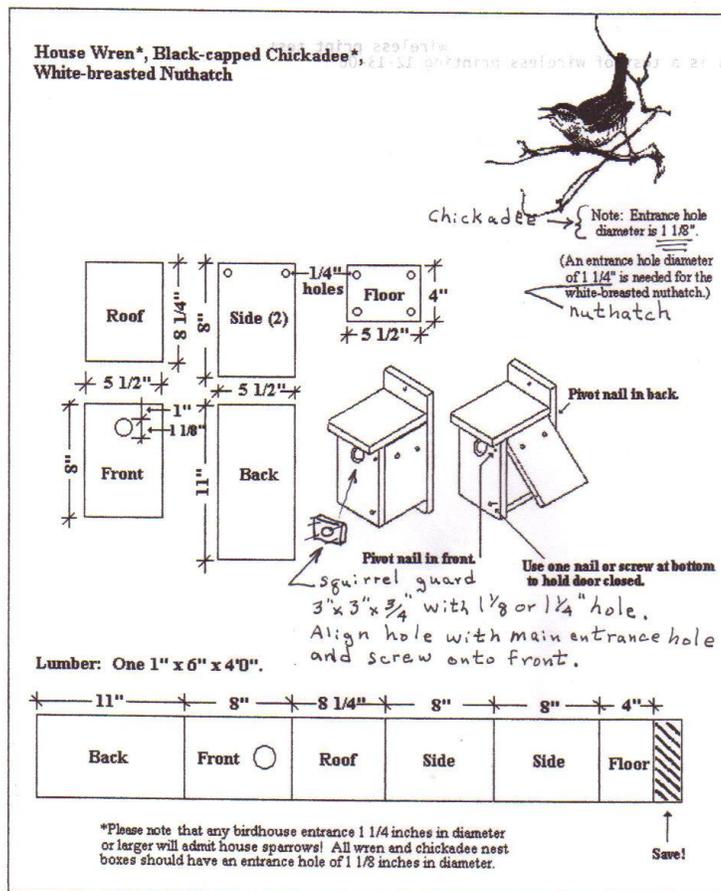
Del Bills is a 28 year Wildwood resident; past Board president; retired electrical engineer; long time Boy Scout leader; a rural farming/ranching boyhood heritage; with an intense interest in nature. You can contact him at www.delbertrbills@msn.com.



Black Bear Yearling at Feeder



Black Bear at My Wildwood Feeder



I've had these birds nest in boxes 5' to 10' high
You can mount on a 5' post or higher directly on
a tree trunk. Good luck. Delbert