

**The Birds of March** by Philip Krajewski

I cannot imagine *in or out like a lamb* referring to the month of March in Tioga County. The arrival of spring, two-thirds into this month, resides somewhere between a 'figment of the imagination' and a 'reasonable facsimile thereof.' As parts of the country sip coffee and greet crocuses, Tioga County is rolling over and pushing the snooze button on the alarm clock. A March spring in the north central highlands is an anomaly entrenched in long underwear waiting to become part of a team.

However, March is, has been, and will always be, my favorite month. Although we ring in the new year on January 1, the natural world is on the brink of renewal each



March. Every year at this time, I feel like I am body surfing. The timing is optimal for riding the big wave into the shoreline; something's coming, and I feel the power. Embracing March is like sticking up for the underdog. I want to cheer on the brownness and stark colors in anticipation of a May fragrance, a July deep green, and the multi colored flush of October.

March is the month of crises with thin ice and deep mud, a proving ground for my temperament, a refining school on how to make life even, settled, and creative. The

circle of my spirit closes the loop in March. This strengthening of character opens the window to enfold lurking traumas. When my truck hops furiously out of a deep rut, into a deeper one, snapping the ball joint and puncturing the gas tank, the inevitable lion roars in derision. Anger and self-pity attempt to surface, but a calm slippery walk up to the house, the fetching of a chain, and yanking out the vehicle with the tractor, keeps muddy March and I partners in Earths' revival.

The Ides of March approaches and birds drift onto the backyard feeder. My esteem peaks as I sense thankfulness and loyalty in the air. The diligence of providing food was threatened twice this winter when I withheld seed to discourage a ravenous group of European starlings. Is my bias against this gang of aliens inconsistent with my appreciation for bird life in general? If a yellow warbler can incubate brown-headed cowbird eggs, shouldn't I be able to let European starlings interrupt the tranquility of my feeder scene and quickly devour everything in sight? I will contemplate whether an unconditional ideal is an appropriate response to this matter, but my present evolutionary position compels me to kick out the bullies.

A winter of constant observation into the behavior of birds has given me the chance to perceive more than the mundane. Although questions arise from peeking into the avian mystery, many conclusions are made. Some understandings may be deeply elusive, but one connection has been grasped: March feeder birds are like old friends with whom I have experienced the bitter winter and survived.

Aside from a mystical quality to feeder watching, many minute details have been

stamped into my knowledge bank. I am more familiar with the molting patterns of the American goldfinch. The beak of the downy woodpecker is one-half its head size, while equal to the 'noggin' on the hairy woodpecker. The flanks of the male purple finch are clear and washed with color, while those of the male house finch are striped; the female house is finely streaked while the female purple is boldly stroked and has a white patch above the eye; chunky is the purple and slender is the house. There are endless variations of the dark-eyed junco and it will feed from the feeder. The brown creeper won't stop at a feeder, even if a person adds blinking lights and covers it with vanilla icing. The northern cardinal is shy and appeared more this year because I planted a large rhododendron next to the feeder. The black-capped chickadee and the nuthatches always take just one seed and fly off. Resident birds get along harmoniously while the interlopers (pine siskins) can be aggressive. Bluebirds can be attracted by mealworms stuffed in peanut butter. Birds are vigilant, and know the difference between a domestic cat and a gray squirrel. A Coopers hawk carries off a tufted titmouse, causes only a tiny interruption in feeder activity, and does not tyrannize this backyard community again.

The overall theme of this season's backyard black oil sunflower party has been the "year of the junco". This polite bird has set an overall feeling of accommodation unlike previous tones like boisterous invasions of evening grosbeaks or raucous domineering of feeders by blue jays. No matter where I traveled, I seemed to scare up large flocks of 'dark-eyes' either by car or by foot. And, because a neighbor pointed out to me a strange bird at their feeder 25 years ago, I dutifully scrutinize all flocks of juncos in excited anticipation of another sighting of the Oregon



sub-species.

Soon chipping and field sparrows will return with tales of dodging cats in central Maryland and play like they never left. Killdeers and red-winged blackbirds will be heard in the valley, cedar waxwings will be seen eating shriveled thorny apples, and American robins will gloriously arrive in packs, dig for worms, and add in the part that Aaron Copeland left out in *Appalachian Spring*.

Just when the early migrants have settled in and renewed old friendships, the area will be barraged with birds frantically looking for a meal while spouting tall tales of shorebirds in Rio and spiders on mango trees. This short period will mark the most critical time in the local bird-food relationship, especially for the group of seed-eaters who showed up daily and graced my feeder with backyard action. Wild food will be gobbled up at exponentially high rates, and continuing to feed birds through the spring will be critical. Full feeders available during this time will be a welcomed source, and those who starred in "Black Oil Rendezvous 2006/2007" will be forever grateful. Reward these hometown March birds and watch their offspring multiply.

*Birdwatch* appears the second Wednesday of each month in the Wellsboro Gazette's Outdoor Section. Please visit [www.tiaudubon.org](http://www.tiaudubon.org) for information about the Tiadaghton Audubon Society.