

Feathered Residents

By Susan Camp

Jim had a big surprise this morning when a male Eastern bluebird landed on the support for the satellite dish outside our kitchen door. We have numerous bluebird residents in our bluebird boxes during the summer, but in the past, we haven't seen the colorful, feisty birds once the weather turns cold.

According to the Cornell Lab of Ornithology "All about Birds" website at <https://www.allaboutbirds.org/search>, Eastern bluebirds (*Sialia sialis*) are considered "resident to medium-distance migrants," which means that bluebirds in the northern United States and Southern Canada will migrate south to Texas and Mexico, while those who reside in the southern United States may travel short distances in winter or remain in their home grounds.

Ever-vigilant about protecting their young from predators, Eastern bluebirds nest in oak or pine tree cavities or nest boxes placed in open areas with light ground cover.

Most of the year, bluebirds forage on the ground for insects, including beetles, crickets, grasshoppers, caterpillars, and spiders. During the cold months, they will consume the berries of black cherry, tupelo, dogwood, hackberry, sumac, juniper, and other trees and shrubs.

American robins (*Turdus migratorius*) also handle cold weather very well during Virginia winters and don't migrate south. Robins in far northern states and Canada migrate to warmer environments on the Gulf Coast and in the Southwest and Mexico.

Robins are ground foragers, dining on worms and other insects in the morning and fruit later in the day. In fall and winter, they eat the berries of various shrubs, including dogwood, hawthorn, juniper, and chokecherry, and may become intoxicated on fermented honeysuckle berries. They like suet, hulled sunflower seeds, mealworms, and peanut hearts, although they will continue to meet most of their nutritional needs by eating insects and spiders. Robins will visit feeders for fresh fruit or berries and raisins or currants softened by soaking them in water.

The northern cardinal (*Cardinalis cardinalis*) is a year-round resident of Virginia. Male and female cardinals are frequent morning and evening visitors to bird feeders. In winter, the eye-catching, bright red plumage of the male cardinal makes a striking contrast to evergreens and snow. The female, although buff-brown, displays accents of dull red on wings, tail, and crest.

Cardinals prefer safflower, hulled and black-oil sunflower seeds, peanut hearts, cracked corn, millet, and milo. In the wild, they eat seeds, berries, and various insects, including beetles, crickets, and flies.

The gray and white tufted titmouse (*Baeolophus bicolor*) with its distinctive crest and the gray Carolina chickadee (*Poecile carolinensis*) with tan belly and black cap and chin are close

cousins that remain in Virginia throughout the year. These small birds live primarily in deciduous woods. They will visit any style feeder, and often they are the first in line for a meal. They eat suet, hulled and black-oil sunflower seeds, safflower seeds, nyjer, and mealworms. Both tufted titmice and Carolina chickadees will fly to a feeder, take one seed and fly to a perch, where they will crack the seed with a sharp tap of the bill.

No current scientific evidence demonstrates that feeding wild birds affects their patterns of seasonal migration. Birds time their migrations by the changing length of daylight hours, not by the amount of food that is available. Even nonmigratory birds that are fed during the winter months will obtain 75% of their food in the wild. If you go on vacation and don't have a neighbor who can clean and restock your feeders, the birds will quickly find other sources of food.

The Cornell Lab of Ornithology website and numerous publications, including "Winter Bird Feeding," contain invaluable information. The National Geographic publication "Complete Birds of North America" is another excellent resource. "The Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Birds: Eastern Region"; "Peterson Field Guides to Eastern Birds"; and "Birds of Virginia Field Guide" are handy paperbacks you can tuck into a jacket pocket if you prefer a book to a cell phone, although you can't snap a photo with a book.