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BIRDS

A little less work in the garden yields a better winter habitat for feathered friends

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The Journal News

Tony Ianniello will not spend time this fall pruning his shrubs and trees, bagging leaves, cutting the grass short and generally making his property nice, neat and trim in preparation for winter. Instead, Ianniello wants to make sure his Somers home is a refuge for the scores of birds that will be looking for food and warmth during the coldest time of year. He'll follow a number of practices to make a bird-friendly yard so that if snow blankets the region, his yard will be a riot of hopping, chirping color, just as it was last winter.

"I had piles of wood on the ground," Ianniello says, "and there were robins and bluebirds, cardinals and other ground feeders out looking for insects."

Ianniello, a 54-year-old electrical engineer, also maintained a heated bird bath.

"I had the littlest chickadees and a red-tailed hawk land on that thing because they are always looking for open water in the wintertime," he says. "It was a real treat. In the middle of winter, birds would line up in the trees, hanging around and waiting their turn to go into the water. It's hysterical watching them."

Taking care of birds during the winter is a longtime avocation for Ianniello, who also serves as vice president of the Bedford Audubon Society. The more than 70 species of birds that remain in the region during the winter - and their Canadian cousins who fly here for warmth - spend a considerable amount of time looking for food and shelter during the bleakest time of year. Hospitable back yards play an important role in helping them survive.

"Making a lawn all nice and tidy in the fall is a fashion," says Brooke Beebe, project director of the Native Plant Center in Valhalla. "But we don't have to do all that work and we can leave food and shelter for all the birds."

"It's a good idea not to cut down the cone flowers, winterberries, goldenrod, asters,

hawthorns and black-eyed Susans," Beebe says, "because all of these are good for the migrating birds and the birds that stay here all year."

Cone flowers' seeds, for example, remain on the plant rather than fall to the ground and attract American gold finches. The seeds are rich in proteins and fats needed by small warm-blooded birds.

Native grasses such as big and little bluestem also provide seeds sought by birds that forage on the ground in winter.

The Audubon Society sponsors an Audubon At Home program designed to encourage homeowners to make their property hospitable to birds year-round. Paul Green, the program's director, says the society discourages homeowners from pruning bushes or cutting native grasses in preparation for winter.

"The bushes serve two roles," he says. "If they have seeds and fruit, they are providing food. And the bushes provide shelter."

Green says when unpruned bushes are covered with snow, particularly if leaves are packed around the base, an "igloo effect" is created that helps the birds survive.

"It can be close to zero with heavy snow cover in much of the garden," he says. "But trapped underneath the bush are pockets of air which are kept warm by the soil. It can be 20 to 30 degrees or more difference inside. It's a self-contained climate that provides warmth and shelter for small, ground-feeding birds."

When there's snow, piles of sticks or leaves in the yard also provide birds with igloo sanctuaries, and hibernating bugs can be found in these natural refrigerators.

"On many plants, there will be insects living right through the winter," Green says. "Black-capped chickadees, the tufted titmouse and white-breasted nuthatches will probe the vegetation to find these insects."

"If people would just leave the vegetation over the winter, the birds will come."

Green also suggests homeowners resist the natural temptation to clean their yards by raking up leaves and having them hauled away. The leaves are home to insects that birds feed on and can be used to pack around bushes for shelter.

The leaves also help keep the base of the bushes protected from the worst of winter's cold and degrades into rich mulch and fertilizer in the spring.

The Bedford Audubon Society maintains four demonstration gardens at its 450-acre Bylane Farm in Katonah to show the simple steps people can take to provide winter homes for a variety of birds. The organization will hold an open house at the farm on Oct. 23.

One easy way to provide winter housing for birds is to leave dead trees alone until spring.

"The minute a tree seems to be rotting, homeowners get a permit and take it right down," says Audubon President John Hannan. "But if the tree is not endangering your property, you should leave it alone, at least until spring. It's a perfect home for

birds in the winter."

Bluebirds and other "nesters" look for rotted old trees because they frequently have cavities where they can huddle. Ten or more bluebirds will bundle together and collectively generate enough heat to comfortably survive nights with temperatures as low as 30 degrees below zero.

Dead trees also often contain beetle larvae and other hibernating bugs, another nutrition source for hungry birds.

"The red-bellied, hairy and downy woodpeckers visit these dead trees on a regular basis all winter long to see what they can find inside," Green says.

A bird-friendly back yard will also attract predators such as owls and several species of hawks.

"The red-tailed hawks stay around all year," Green says. "They come and eat the birds. They've got to live as well."

In Somers, Ianniello is looking forward to another winter with a yard full of colorful birds. He particularly wants to spot the great horned owl he has heard in the trees, but never seen.

"Birds are always around," he says. "And I'm always looking for the one I haven't seen before, hoping it will come down so I can get a glimpse of it."

But taking care of the birds in winter has a sober side. Birds are creatures of habit and tend to return to the same places to breed and eat.

"When the food is here the birds are here," Ianniello says. "And when the food is gone, a lot of them just die."

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For more information

To learn more about providing food and shelter for wintering birds, contact these organizations:

The Native Plant Center

75 Grasslands Road, Valhalla

914-785-7870

www.nativeplantcenter.org

National Audubon Society, Audubon at Home program

www.audubon.org

Bedford Audubon Society

Bylane Farm, 35 Todd Road, Katonah

914-232-1999

www.bedfordaudubon.org

New York Botanical Garden

Bronx River Parkway, Exit 7W at Fordham Road, Bronx

718-817-8700

www.nybg.org/events/birds_of_autumn.html