

## Teacher's Corner: Winter Birds

By Jenni Malone, Director

While more northern parts of the continent are limited in the species of birds available for viewing during the winter months, Houston hosts a wide variety of winter avian residents - from robins and goldfinches that fly south (to Houston) for the winter, to wrens, blue jays, chickadees, and cardinals, who are with us year-round.



American Robin



Blue Jay

Winter can be a wonderful season to begin conducting bird investigations because your subjects will literally come to you if you set out a feeder or two. A variety of foods will attract a variety of birds: pine cones stuffed with suet or peanut butter with cornmeal and rolled in bird seed; sunflower seeds on a tray; sugar water in a hummingbird feeder, etc.

For best viewing, set up your feeders within sight of a window if possible. This can work especially well for a classroom if you have a wall of windows. The students can see the birds at the feeders and record their observations without scaring the birds away. Alternatively, small groups or individual students can record feeder activity in a class log throughout the day. If window watching is not practical, set up your feeders in places that can be easily observed from a short distance away.

Bird feeders can also provide a good opportunity for learning to use binoculars. You and your children or students can practice with real binoculars or with homemade toilet paper tube versions.

Look at a feeder. While keeping your eyes on the feeder lift the binoculars to your eyes and look at the feeder through the lenses. Note: It is harder than it sounds. We tend to look down at the binoculars as we lift them up to our eyes. Don't be discouraged if it doesn't work the first time.

Set your feeder(s) up at least a few days before you want to begin observations. When your feeder(s) begin attracting birds you and your students can begin making and recording observations. They can be informal or structured depending on the age and experience of your group. You can begin with basic observations of color, size, and food choice, and progress to behaviors, more detailed observations, and identification.

Some questions you can pose to your students as they watch a group of birds feeding:

- What color are the birds?
- Do they eat together or chase each other away?
- Do they chase other birds away or get chased away by other birds?
- What do the birds do when they aren't eating?
- How do the birds eat?
  - o Do they take one seed at a time or more?
  - o Do they eat at the feeder or on the ground?
  - o Are they messy or neat eaters?



Carolina Chickadee



Northern Cardinals

You can also invite your students to draw a picture of one of the birds you see at the feeder. You can use a children's bird field guide to identify the birds you see. You can make charts and graphs of the data you collect.

We hope that you and your young ornithologists enjoy your bird investigations. When spring migrations begin, you will be ready to enjoy watching the migrants moving up from South America as they pass through Houston.

See the **Nature Kids** page for some easy-to-make bird feeders.

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## Nature Kids: Winter Bird Feeders

Most of us are familiar with pine cone bird feeders filled with peanut butter or suet and rolled in seeds. They aren't the only way to attract our winter friends. Try some of these ideas and see who comes to munch!

### Fruit Garland

String dried and/or fresh fruit on a string using a darning needle (they have rounded points). You can use oranges, raisins, other dried fruit, even bread squares. Tie the ends together and drape it from a tree.

### Suet Cookies

1. Melt some beef suet (the hard fat). Remove from heat and pour in some seeds. Mix in the seeds using a wooden spoon or spatula. (Have an adult help with this to be safe!)
2. While the suet mix is cooling, lay a sheet of wax paper on a cookie sheet. Set several cookie cutters on the wax paper. Pour the cooling suet mix in the cookie cutters. Stick a toothpick through the suet near the top of the cookie.
3. Put the tray into the refrigerator or freezer to harden the suet. After it hardens, remove the cookie cutter and toothpick. Tie a loop of string through the hole and hang from a favorite tree or bush. (these work best in cold weather when the suet will stay firm)

### Bird Pudding

Put some seeds, peanuts, oatmeal and bread crumbs in a bowl. Pour some melted suet into the bowl. (Note: the exact proportions are not important). Stir the mixture and let set. Turn the mix out onto a plate, fill a half coconut shell or empty can and hang from a tree or bush.

When you have put your feeders in places where you can watch them, get a bird guide and binoculars (if you have them) and get set for some bird watching.

See the **Teacher's Corner** for things to look for as you watch birds at your feeders.



