# Wild Bird Habitat Store

## December Newsletter - 2026


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**Did you know a bird can lose up to 1/4 of their weight on a cold winter's night to keep warm?**

### December Bird Notes:

- December is the **127th Annual Christmas Bird Count**. ***Details inside***
- The winter survival of many songbirds is enhanced by backyard bird feeders.
- Continue keeping an eye out for any new birds at your feeders or in your yard.
- Northern Goldfinches are arriving in droves. Make sure your Nyjer thistle is fresh.
- Share your special feeding area with family and friends this Holiday Season. Watch how excited they get. Maybe they'll become another bird enthusiast.
- Open water in winter is vital for birds to survive. Check out our de-icers & heated bird baths.
- Bird feeders and bird feeding supplies make great Christmas gifts. So consider a gift of nature.

## SHOP WILD BIRD HABITAT STORE'S
## ANNUAL HOLIDAY SALES

**Consider a gift of nature such as a backyard bird feeder for a friend, colleague, or relative and start them on a life long experience of enjoying birds**



## Pine Siskin



There is a growing probability that we may see an onslaught of irruptive bird species in the Central Plains this winter. This may include Common Redpolls, Pine Siskin, crossbills, and others that generally remain in the Boreal forests of Canada during the winter months with only a few stragglers moving south. Reports are that many forested areas in the central and western Boreal forest have had a low production of fruits and cones many of these birds rely on. With low food production, many of these birds will move south during the winter months in mass numbers searching for food. One of those bird species that's enjoyable to see are the Pine Siskins.

Pine Siskins are a small, energetic finch that brings plenty of activity to backyard bird feeders, particularly during the winter months. Although easily overlooked because of its modest size and streaked brown appearance, this little bird has a fascinating life history. Its unpredictable movements, social behavior, and ability to survive in harsh winter conditions make it an interesting member of the finch family.

The Pine Siskin is a small songbird weighing about a half ounce measuring approximately 4½ to 5½ inches in length, with a wingspan of about 7 to 9 inches. It has a slender, pointed bill, a short-notched tail, and heavily streaked brown and white plumage.

One of its most distinctive characteristics is the bright yellow coloration found in its wings and tail. These yellow patches are especially noticeable when the bird is in flight. Males and females look very similar, making them difficult to distinguish in the field.

Pine Siskins are sometimes mistaken for female House Finches or other small brown finches, but their heavily streaked bodies, slender bills, and yellow wing markings help set them apart.

Pine Siskins are found throughout much of North America. Their breeding range extends across Alaska and Canada, south into mountainous areas of the western United States. They also breed in suitable forested habitats in parts of the northern United States.

Their preferred habitats include coniferous forests, mixed woodlands, forest edges, and areas containing spruce, fir, pine, and other seed-producing trees. During the winter, they may move into parks, residential neighborhoods, and backyards where food is readily available.

Unlike many migratory songbirds, Pine Siskins do not follow a predictable migration schedule. They are considered an *irruptive species*, meaning their movements vary greatly from year to year depending largely on a productive nesting season producing large numbers of off-spring. These larger numbers of birds with a reduced supply of natural foods can often set off a migration moving south in search of food called an irruption.

**WINGTIP:** The forecast for this winter is that irruptive bird species from Canada's Boreal Forest may be higher than normal. Boreal tree seeds of spruce, pine, and other cone producing conifers along with seeds on birch trees and berries on understory shrubs naturally fluctuates from year to year. In the 2026 –27 the winter forecast shows poor seed crops across parts of the central boreal forest are pushing some finches east and south. Added to the normal fruiting and cone production cycles of trees, wildfires and drought can stress forested habitats further disrupting local berry and cone yields.



Seeds make up the majority of the Pine Siskin's diet. They particularly favor seeds from conifers, including pine, spruce, fir, and hemlock. They also consume seeds from grasses, weeds, birch, alder, and other plants.

One of the most interesting things about Pine Siskins is their unpredictable migration patterns. They are not true long-distance migrants following a regular route each year. Instead, they move in response to food availability, particularly the abundance or failure of conifer seed crops.

During years when food is scarce in northern Canada and Alaska, large numbers may move south into the United States. These movements are called *irruptions*. During other years, Pine Siskins may remain farther north and be relatively uncommon in many parts of the United States.

If Pine Siskins do irrupt in large numbers this winter, as they have in the past, you will most likely see them if you feed birds. Siskins readily eat at backyard bird feeders, especially if you provide them the wild bird feeds they prefer. These wild bird feeds include fresh Nyjer thistle seed, premium black oil sunflower seed, hulled sunflower seeds and white Proso millet. Nutra safflower is another option due to the seeds thin hull and high oil content.

Seed tube bird feeders and Nyger thistle feeders work best for attracting Pine Siskins. However, they will also feed at hopper bird feeders and platform bird feeders unless larger birds are present.



They are highly social birds and often travel in noisy flocks. When a flock discovers a dependable food source, dozens of birds may gather at one location and over-run a bird feeder. They are also known to cling to seed heads and branches, using their slender bills to extract seeds. It's enjoyable when a flock has discovered your feeders. They are fun to watch as they busily chatter, nudging they're way onto a perch to feed.

This explains why bird watchers may see hundreds of Pine Siskins one winter and hardly any the following year. Their irruptions are somewhat cyclic, generally occurring every three to four years.

**WINGTIP:** It's not uncommon if you attract a large number of Pine Siskins for them to take over a Nyjer thistle feeder, often making it difficult for goldfinches to find a perch and feed. To remedy this, we suggest adding a second Nyjer thistle feeder with fresh Nyjer seed or seed tube feeder with hulled sunflower hearts.

Pine Siskins generally breed in northern coniferous forests, where they build small, cup-shaped nests in the branches of evergreen trees. The female usually constructs the nest using grasses, twigs, moss, rootlets, and other plant materials, lining it with softer materials such as feathers and hair.

Once the nest is completed the female typically lays three to five pale bluish-green eggs with dark markings. She does most of the incubation, which lasts approximately 12 to 13 days. Once the brood has hatched both parents will participate in feeding the young. Young Pine Siskins generally leave the nest in about 13 to 15 days after hatching, and again, both parents will continue feeding them for a period after they fledge. In years when food is especially abundant, Pine Siskins may raise more than one brood.

Nebraska is an important wintering area for Pine Siskins, although their numbers vary considerably from year to year. They are considered common but irregular visitors during migration and winter throughout the state.

They are most often encountered in flocks during the fall, winter, and early spring. Look for them around evergreen trees, woodland edges, weedy fields, and at backyard feeders.

Although Nebraska is not considered a major breeding area for Pine Siskins, occasional nesting does occur. Nesting has been documented in several parts of the state, including the Pine Ridge region and eastern Nebraska. These nesting attempts are often associated with winters when unusually large numbers of siskins move into the state.

Homeowners can help attract Pine Siskins by providing reliable food sources and suitable habitat. They particularly enjoy Nyjer seed, black-oil sunflower seeds and hulled sunflower hearts.

A few ways to make your yard more attractive to Pine Siskins, and many other bird species, is to include a variety of backyard bird feeders such as: seed tube feeders (large round open ports with perches), Nyjer thistle feeders (can be a tube type feeder or a mesh finch can cling to). Hopper and platform feeders work well also. And provide a variety of quality wild bird feeds, avoiding the economy wild bird feeds that contain numerous fillers the birds will reject, and eject.

Apart from offering a variety of bird feeders with a variety of quality wild bird feeds to attract a variety of bird species, its also beneficial to plant native seed-producing flowers and grasses. Maintain evergreen trees and shrubs for shelter and nesting sites. And of course, provide fresh water year-round, especially during the winter months. As they say, "you can attract more birds to your yard in winter with water than with bird seed alone".

Pine Siskins, because they often gather in large numbers at bird feeders, can be susceptible to salmonella outbreaks at these crowded bird feeders. So, keeping bird feeders cleaned regularly is important. Also remove wet or spoiled seed, and occasionally rake up debris under the feeders. We clean up after our domestic house pets, so surely we can do a little cleaning up after the birds in our backyards.

### A Few Interesting Facts About Pine Siskins



- Pine Siskins can sometimes travel in flocks numbering in the thousands.
- They are remarkably cold-hardy for such small birds.
- They can cling upside down to branches while feeding on seeds.
- Their yellow wing and tail markings are especially noticeable during flight.
- Their winter appearances are strongly influenced by seed production in northern forests.
- They sometimes nest much farther south than their normal breeding range following major winter irruptions.

The Pine Siskin may be small, but it is a fascinating bird with remarkable adaptability. Its unpredictable movements, social feeding habits, and ability to withstand harsh winter weather make it a welcome visitor to Nebraska backyards. The next time a flock of small, streaked finches arrives at your feeder, take a closer look. Those little birds with flashes of yellow in their wings may be Pine Siskins!

### About Black Oil Sunflower Seed

Not all black oil sunflower seed is the same. Wild Bird Habitat's black oil sunflower seeds are premium grade, independently tested to be pesticide free and non-GMO. It's is air cleaned to remove dust and debris, and 99.9% have a fully mature seed inside. Premium black oil sunflower is used in the food industry for its high-quality oil for cooking and in food products.



Premium B/O

In a bag of economy, or #2, black oil sunflower seed, as much as15% of the weight can be sticks and debris. The bags often contains agricultural dust ladened with toxic chemicals and heavy metals that can impact a bird's health. The shells may have under developed immature seeds or seeds impacted by insects, disease, or frost. A percentage of shells may contain no seed at all and are referred to in the industry as 'blanks'. Birds will test seeds for weight, or with a quick shake to determine if its worth the effort to crack it open, or just drop it.



#2 B/O

Economy packagers buy up #2 black oil sunflower seed at low prices then sell it off at discounts in big box stores, grocery stores, or other outlets. However, the majority of #2 black oil sunflower seed crop is ground up as feed for the livestock industry.

## Dave's December Bird Chatter




December is the month for the Annual Christmas Bird Count. Now in its 127th year, it is fun and adventurous. There are always a number of rare or unusual birds that are sighted. If you can participate in the field, it can be rewarding. If not, perhaps you will watch your bird feeders on count day and report the birds you see. Often times, counting birds at backyard bird feeders is the difference between a successful count and an average count since it allows many more individuals and families to participate. Become a citizen scientist and provide valuable data during the annual Christmas Bird Count to help biologists determine the state of our birds.

In Lincoln, and nearby areas, we hope for a large turnout for this year's **CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT** (CBC). Everyone of all levels of birding experience and abilities are encouraged to participate. Register for the CBC with Jason the 'Birdnerd' St Sauver at **jason.stsauver@audubon.org**. **It's FREE**. You'll receive emails from the Lincoln Coordinator/Compiler, Jason the Birdnerd, and have opportunities for eBird and CBC trainings videos. The count in Lincoln, NE and the surrounding area will be Sunday, Dec. 20 with a free lunch party during or right after the count. JOIN THE FUN and help the birds by counting them!

**WINGTIP:** No matter where you live across Nebraska or across North America, there is an organized bird count in the field and backyards where you live. Find a Christmas Bird Count near you at **https://cbc.audubon.org/en/join**

It has been a mixed bag of weather in the Great Plains for the fall of 2026. From near record cold to above average warm days it's difficult to adjust. With above seasonal temperatures birds require less energy than they need when the temperature drops. And with an abundance of natural foods available, birds have no doubt been delighted in taking advantage of those resources. However, colder temperatures will arrive soon and as natural food supplies slowly decrease the birds will begin to spend more time at well stocked bird feeders. Birds are opportunistic by nature which has helped them survive over millions of years despite the endless human activity over the past 200 years.

As the Polar Vortex expands south over the next month, we will certainly begin to see more northern birds moving south in search of food sources. Flocks of northern goldfinches will begin to arrive and remain with us throughout the winter until May before returning north. Many of our resident adult goldfinches may drift south for the winter and return in early March. This is why people can become overwhelmed with goldfinches at their feeders between March and early May, which has been dubbed "finch season".



If you do not have a finch feeder already, now would be a great time to add one to your bird feeding program. If you already feed the finches you may want to consider adding a second finch feeder especially if the Pine Siskin and Common Redpolls appear in large numbers this winter as expected.

Nyjer thistle feeders are specialized bird feeders for feeding Nyjer thistle seed, a favorite food of finches. Make certain the Nyjer thistle seed is fresh. Hulled sunflower seed is also highly attractive as is Nutra safflower offered in a seed tube bird feeder.

**WINGTIP:** Nyjer thistle seed, a member of the coreopsis family not a true thistle, has a high oil content. It is imported into North America from India and surrounding countries where they extract cooking oil from the seeds, but we use it in bird feeders to attractive finches. If stored for extended periods of time the oils begin to dry out and the finch will reject it. Purchase you Nyjer thistle seed from reputable suppliers to assure freshness.

You may want to try using a finch mix in your thistle feeders, but be careful, not all finch mixes are created equal. Check the label on any finch mix you purchase. You may be surprised to see such products as canary reed grass, red millet, flax, and other added filler seeds finches reject. Finch mixes at Wild Bird Habitat do not contain any filler seeds but a combination of 50% fresh Nyjer thistle and 50% fine sunflower chips, both are highly attractive to finches giving them the best of both worlds.

**WINGTIP:** Squirrels rarely bother a thistle feeder filled with Nyjer seed. But be careful when using a finch mix containing fine sunflower chips. That will get a squirrel's immediate attention. When using a finch mix, we recommend using a squirrel baffle or make certain that squirrels cannot access the feeder.



Occasionally an article surfaces that people may make birds lazy by offering them supplement foods. That birds may lose their instinctive ability to forage. This myth has scientifically been proven to be far from the truth. Birds are opportunistic. They will take advantage of our kindness when we offer them food in our backyards, and research shows it does not impact their natural ability to find food in the wild. In fact, it has been documented that the survival rate of birds during the harsh winter months is consistent and often enhanced when supplemental foods are made available. Birds have little body fat to store energy, and when the temperatures plummet, they are a mere thirty-six hours from starvation. Birds rely solely on the foods they consume during the shortened daylight hours of winter to get through frigid nights as a bird can burn up almost a quarter of their weight just to stay warm.

So, keep the feeders filled. Add another feeder to your bird feeding program. Birds do benefit from humans providing supplemental sources of food, fresh water, adding bird houses for nesting and shelter, and planting habitat. In return birds provide us with a relaxing, enjoyable, and educational lifelong experience.

You may be asking yourself, "What seeds and mixes are best to feed birds". The "ideal diet" for birds during winter are those high in oil content which provides the necessary fat calories to get through the cold nights. Sunflower seed, safflower seed, Nyjer thistle and peanuts provide up to 20-25% protein and 30-40% fat. That's why they make up the majority of our favorite, high-quality bird feed mixes. You'll find "cheap" mixes full of Milo, wheat, red millet, and other assorted grain products that are least preferred by birds. These low -cost seed mixes only contain 8-12% protein and 2-4% fat with as much as 40% of the product ending up uneaten and scattered on the ground. All wild bird feeds are required to be labeled by law by the order of its ingredients with the nutritional value on the label as well.



**Wild Bird Habitat's Fruit & Nut Mix**

One of Wild Bird Habitat's bestselling wild bird feeds that can be used in any bird feeder is Nutra safflower seed, also known as golden or brown safflower. Nutra safflower is high in fat and contains about 30% of the fatty oils that birds need for energy and to keep warm. Most all birds, including goldfinches, will readily feed on it while 99% of squirrels will leave it alone. That's right! Squirrels are not fond of safflower seed but the birds enjoy it. And just as we enjoy a varied diet, so do the birds. That's why we recommend a variety of bird feeders with different, high quality wild bird feeds in each of them. This will increase the diversity of birds you attract, as well as the numbers of birds coming to your yard.



**Nutra Safflower**

You can be certain that wild bird feeds offered at Wild Bird Habitat are of the highest quality on the market. The wild bird feeds at Des Moines Feed are frequently tested by third party laboratories for safety and quality. We will not compromise on that quality by selling inferior wild bird feeds that are least beneficial or attractive for birds and can cost money in wasted, uneaten bird seed. And regular shipments two to three times each week from our local supplier, Des Moines Feed, guarantees that the wild bird feeds at Wild Bird Habitat are always fresh.

Remember that water is scarce during extremely cold weather. Birds, just as humans, must stay hydrated daily to survive, so keeping fresh water for your birds all winter long is beneficial. This may be a good time to invest in a bird bath and heater or heated bird bath if you haven't already. Most of these products carry up to a three-year warranty and are well worth the cost. You'll be surprised at how many more birds you will attract to your backyard with open water.



**API-650 Heated Bird Bath**

Christmas is a great time to get a friend or relative interested in feeding birds by giving them a gift of a backyard bird feeder. When having friends or relatives over for the Holiday point out the birds that are visiting your feeders. Your excitement will surely wear off on them and it may inspire them to begin feeding birds. Have your children, grandchildren, nieces or nephews sit down with you and watch the birds. You'd be surprised how interested they are to watch nature if given the opportunity, and how observant they become. It's a great way to relax during the Holidays and helps us to remember that the spirit of the season is about life on earth and the natural world we are a part of. The staff at Wild Bird Habitat wishes everyone a Merry Christmas and Happy Holidays.

## A Christmas Feast by the Window

The stockings are hung by the chimney with care,
While out in the yard, there's a chill in the air.

The snow settles softly on branches of pine,
And frost paints the glass in a delicate line.

We've hung up the feeders with holiday cheer,
A banquet of warmth for the friends gathered here.

With suet and peanuts and sunflower seed,
A wintertime blessing for creatures in need.

A cardinal flashes like a bright crimson spark,
Against the pale snow in the gathering dark.

A chickadee hops with a cheerful *dee-dee*,
While nuthatches scurry upside-down on the tree.

No ribbons or bows wrap the gifts that we share,
Just a flutter of birds suspended in air.

As carols ring softly inside by the light,
Our feathered guests roost through this magical night.

*Merry Christmas & Happy Holidays*
*from the entire staff at*
*The Wild Bird Habitat Stores*
*And good birding to all!*

## Enjoying Squirrels - More or Less



The Fox Squirrel is the most common squirrel in Nebraska, with Grey Squirrels along the lower Missouri River, and a spattering of Black Squirrels in the Eastern part of the state. But worldwide there are over 365 species of squirrels! An adult squirrel typically lives alone, but will huddle together in their nests during extreme cold to stay warm. In the winter, squirrels are most active in the morning hours and tend to stick around the nest the rest of the day. Mating season begins in late summer and again in late winter so acrobatic chase scenes are more common during those periods. Through January and August listen for the screeching calls of the young in the nest begging for food. In the summer, squirrels are most active in the morning and tend to rest in the afternoon. They will reemerge to forage for a couple hours before sunset.

- Typical litter size is 3-4.
- Squirrels' can eat their weight in seed in one week, about 4 lbs.
- Squirrels' front teeth grow 6 inches per year and are worn down by gnawing.
- Top speed for squirrels is 20 mph.
- Squirrels can launch themselves 4 vertical feet and 8 horizontal feet.
- They can scale a half inch pole or shimmy down a thin wire.

Whether you admire squirrels or detest their ability to out smart us, they can certainly challenge our attempts to keep them away from the bird feeders, and stop them from burying acorns in our lawns. After all, squirrels have from sun-up to sun-down to outwit us with their unique abilities.



The black squirrel occurs as a melanistic subgroup of both the eastern gray squirrel and the fox squirrel. Their habitat extends throughout the Midwestern United States, in some areas of the Northeastern United States and Eastern Canada.

## Attracting Cardinals to Your Yard



One of our favorite backyard birds is the Northern Cardinal. It is common to have numerous cardinals in your yard feeding in the fall and winter. It is not that they congregate in a flock, but if one or more cardinals find a steady food source, it attracts the attention of others who join in. Although they are opportunistic there are certain bird feeders they prefer. Since they like to perch on large areas to feed, a hopper style bird feeder with a sizable area to perch works well as does a platform bird feeder. If you want to attract them to a seed tube bird feeder you'll need to install a tray on the bottom. Their preferred wild bird food is black oil sunflower seed, hulled sunflower seed, safflower seed, and of course peanuts.

## Awww! Nuts



Peanut Feeders make a great addition to backyard bird feeding. Peanuts are high in fat which provides the essential energy needed by birds to survive the cold winter temperatures. Attract woodpeckers, nuthatches, Chickadees, Carolina Wrens and others with a bird feeder designed for feeding shelled peanuts.

**Make this the year you take friends and family to our 3 local nature centers and enjoy birds and nature more**

- **Pioneers Park Nature Center**
- **Audubon's Spring Creek Prairie**
- **Wachiska's Prairie Pines**

**Search online for events, activities, and programs for all ages. Or just take a walk through the prairies, woodlands, wetlands, or around the ponds at any of these locations and connect with nature.**