

Winter Visitors in the Garden

Gardens seem places of quiet stillness in winter. Bright flowers have now withered into stalks with floppy seed heads. Green decorative grasses are now rusty brown clumps. Flitting movement of bees and butterflies have now evaporated. Even gardeners are tucked warmly inside on these cold days. Look closer in your gardens, though, and you'll see activity that can be captivating. What is this activity?

Meet the fascinating birds of winter. While you are warmly inside, these birds are busily foraging in your gardens: picking through garden debris in search of seeds, sifting through fallen leaves in search of insects, snatching berries from shrubs and trees. We often see small flocks of these birds and shrug them off as "only sparrows," an often maligned name thanks to the invasion of the foreign house sparrows which have displaced so many of our native birds.

Beyond the easily recognizable Northern Cardinals and Blue Jays, who are these winter visitors to our gardens?



White-Throated Sparrow

One special winter visitor is the **White-Throated Sparrow**. Note the stripes on its head which can be either white and black or tan and black. But the patch on its throat is always white. Note also the small yellow spot between the eye and the bill. In winter, it forages primarily for seeds of grasses and weeds and fruits of sumac, grape and berries.

When feeding, it uses both feet at once to scratch backwards. Then, it pounces forward to snatch any food uncovered.

A similar looking bird is the **White Crowned Sparrow**. This winter visitor also sports black and white stripes on its crown. However, it does not have the white throat patch of its cousin. And its bill is pink or yellowish, unlike the grayish bill of its cousin. It feeds on seeds of grasses and weeds as well as on corn, wheat and other grains. It also feeds by making a quick hop backwards to move leaves and then pounces forward to snatch what it has uncovered.



White-Crowned Sparrow



Dark-eyed Junco

At first glance, the ***Dark-eyed Junco*** is easy to overlook. But, note the elegant, velvety gray upper parts contrasting with its bright, white underparts. Often called the “Snowbird,” it arrives with the onset of winter and retreats north when spring arrives. A busy feeder, it flicks its tail often as it forages for seeds. Note the white outer tail feathers, easily seen while it feeds and flits from tree and shrub branches.

One of Oklahoma’s year-round residents is the ***Carolina Wren***. More brightly colored than other wrens, it explores brush piles and tangles of grasses and weeds searching mainly for hiding insects and spiders, even in winter. However, in winter it also survives on berries, small fruits, some seeds and even some nuts. It will often scold you if you surprise it or interrupt its feeding. Reddish brown above and buff-colored below, it has a white eyebrow stripe and long, downward curving bill.



Carolina Wren

Winter birds often feed in small mixed flocks of sparrows, juncos, wrens, chickadees and others. What a great opportunity to warm your heart on any cold day by seeing how many different winter birds visit your garden! Be careful, though . . . watching birds can become addictive! Soon, you’ll be buying a small feeder, and then a pair of binoculars, and then a bird book, and then . . .

Check the sources below for more information about identifying winter birds (and spring, and summer, and autumn birds)

[Enjoying Oklahoma's Wintering Visitors--OSU Division of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources](#)

[All About Birds--Cornell Lab of Ornithology](#)

Audubon Guide to North American Birds

Attracting Birds to your Backyard--Oklahoma Dept of Wildlife Conservation

Winter Hawks in Oklahoma--Oklahoma Dept of Wildlife Conservation