

HOW WE HELP WILDLIFE SURVIVE WINTER

As the temperatures dip, birds acquire adaptive behaviors to survive cold nights as they may lose up to 15% of their total body weight. Some grow additional feathers to thicken their insulation. Others do feather fluffing to puff out down feathers to create air pockets to trap body heat. Still, others lower their metabolic rates to cause body temp decline and heart rates to decrease so fewer calories are burned on cold winter nights. At a time when caloric requirements are increasing, the food supplies (e.g. insects, seeds, weeds, fruit and nuts) are being eaten rapidly or do not exist in our landscapes. And, with freezing temperatures, no water is available at a time when dehydration is more critical than starvation. Eating snow takes precious energy and water is needed for hydration and preening to keep feathers aligned and positioned to prevent the loss of body heat faster.

We can help by providing continuous filling of bird feeders with nyjer, black oil sunflower seed, and suet which birds find and come to rely on throughout the winter. Water in a liquid state can be maintained by using heated birdbaths or by placing heating elements in existing baths. The heaters are thermostatically controlled when temps drop below freezing. Nesting boxes should be cleaned out and left for some species like the black chickadee which roost together in these boxes at night or on windy cold days.

As gardeners, we can plan to utilize planting materials that provide berries such as junipers. We can also put off our fall clean-ups until spring when temperatures begin to rise. Perennials with seed heads, herbaceous shrubs that provide protection from the cold, and old rotting limbs can provide food and roosting sites for many species. Leaves left on garden beds provide warmth and food for beneficial insects and amphibians. Put out some seed, continue to feed consistently, fill up that bath and install a heater, and put off that pruning and clean-up until spring. So, who doesn't want less work to do now and instead just enjoy our beautiful feathered allies who help us control insects all season long??