



Feeder watchers often marvel at how birds manage to survive our severe winters. Granted, many birds do perish, but the hardy individuals that manage to stay alive ensure good breeding stock for the survival of the species.

How do birds cope with cold, snow and ice with so little protection? After all, when we feel chilly we add an extra layer of clothing. We can also retire to the protection of our homes and stoke up the fire. Birds don't have such amenities, but they have evolved certain physical attributes and behaviours that work in their favour. Most birds 'wear' a heavier coat of feathers in winter, and can puff them out at will. This action entraps air, which increases the insulating factor of the feathers themselves. So, when on a cold day, we notice our little chickadees look much plumper, we can assume they are warming themselves up. Birds store extra fat on their bodies in winter. This serves as both insulation and fuel. When food is a scarce, they can 'live' off their fat. For instance, Northern Cardinals store up about three days worth of fat and can manage for that period without food. After that, if sustenance is not available, they will soon die. "The wonder of Birds" says, that if crossbills roosting for the night become cold, they use their body fat to warm them up through a process known as "catabolism". This process is begun when the bird starts to shiver. Shivering causes muscles throughout the body to contract in opposition to one another. Thus, the bird is exercising without actually moving. This releases immediate warmth to the body. As long as there is enough fat left to 'burn' the system works well. But when it is all gone, energy is drawn from the bird's muscles, and that can bring about its eventual death. I assume that other roosting species go through the same process during bitter weather. Food and shelter are of prime importance for the survival of birds in winter. Those that remain here have many different methods of obtaining their nourishment. Woodpeckers with their specialized bills and tongues, can reach insect

larvae in bark crevices, or carpenter ants and other insects deep within the tree itself. They are also able to augment their diets with various seeds and berries. Cedar Waxwings, that live mainly on insects during the summer, switch over to berries in winter. They rove around in large flocks, cleaning out one section of fruit, then moving on to another. Much to the surprise of many, some American Robins decide to stay with us for the winter. They too depend on various berries and frozen apples to sustain them throughout the cold weather. Predators, like hawks and owls prey on mice, squirrels, rabbits and birds. Ducks, such as Common Mergansers search our areas of open water, and continue to dive for fish. When food is readily available certain birds cache it for later use. White-breasted Nuthatches tuck food into cervices and knot holes. Blue Jays bury and hide food in various places. Often the jays seem to forget their hiding place. A familiar feeling? (Now where did I put my car keys?) Northern shrikes have a 'larder' where they store their excess mice. They impale the hapless creatures on a sharp object often a thorn bush will have several mice hanging from it-future food for the shrike. This habit has earned this species the nickname of "butcher bird". To end this particular subject.

I'll relate an incident already reported in a former column. I once watched a Barred Owl retrieve a stored frozen mouse from a crow's nest. The mouse was swallowed whole with great difficulty. As the owl gradually worked it down its throat, the mouse's tail slowly disappeared. (I hope you are not sipping your tea as you read!) Of course, our feeders supply wintering birds with a good source of nourishment. Putting out both seeds and fat is a good idea, for many species eat both. Try not to be too uptight if predators arrive at your feeder. They have to eat too, and they will turn up where their favourite type of food is available. They usually take the sick and less wary birds. This leaves the stronger birds to replenish the species. How do birds shelter in winter, especially during severe storms? Woodpeckers, as well other species, take shelter in tree holes. Some, like crossbills, retire to thick evergreens; others such as Tree Sparrows disappear into bush piles. Mouse Sparrows seek shelter under eaves, and European Starlings sit around chimneys availing themselves of the available heat. Sometimes ruffed Grouse and Snow Buntings bury themselves in the snow and Horned Larks and Lapland Longspurs stay out of the wind by hunkering down in the furrows. Brown Creepers arrange themselves in a circle, head to head,

on lee side of a large tree. This configuration allows them to share their body heat. Some species also share body heat by piling into bird houses as they seek shelter from winter winds. Eastern Bluebirds are noted for this ploy during ice storms in their wintering grounds. I have just touched on some of the many ways that birds cope with severe winter weather. There are ways you can help; plant evergreens for shelter; grow shrubs that hold their berries in winter; make a brush pile or build a winter roosting box. The latter is an elongated bird house with enough inside perches

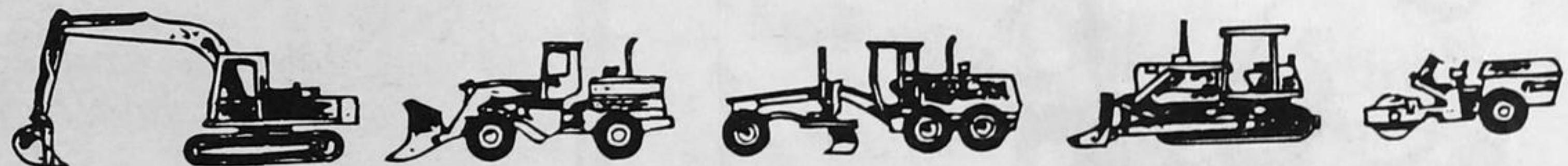
for several birds.

On October 18 Leorene Hayes had 6 American Robins in her yard, and on November 16 a large group of house finchers arrived there.

Paddy cutfield saw 5 Pine Grosbeaks on October 21 and heard a Saw-Whet Owl on October 22. Janet Weisiger was thrilled to see a flock of Cedar Waxwings eating juniper berries at her place.

And now its time to say good-bye to my readers. I have enjoyed writing this column and have met many interesting people over the phone. You have been a delight. Please feel free to call me in spite of the sad chemise of the North Leeds Lantern. The number to call is 359-5178.

Have a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year as well as GOOD BIRDING!



Donald H. Wills construction Company Limited

R.R. #2 Portland, Ontario

- * Excavating
- * Road Building Specialists
- * Ditching
- * Rubber tired & crawler loaders
- * Equipment Rentals
- * Road Grading
- * Bulldozing
- * Landscaping

* Rock wall builders

100% Shredded and screened topsoil (The best in Leeds County)

Please feel free to call us collect at (613) 283-7363

Established in 1934 by Ivan Wills

