



resource room

Winter Birds Need Berries



A “berry good” source of winter fuel!

WRITTEN BY ROSEANNE VAN EE,
WILDBC FACILITATOR

Roseanne is our long-time facilitator in Vernon. She enthusiastically shares her vast knowledge of the outdoors to help teachers and leaders experience and enjoy nature.

BC hosts about 550 species of birds; more than any other province or territory in Canada. While many birds migrate to warmer climates each fall, plenty of resident bird species remain here year-round despite the cold. Most resident songbirds (also known as *passerines* or *perching birds*) are seed and fruit eaters. These birds need winter berries; they’re the perfect fuel to keep warm through a BC winter.

Native plants and birds have evolved together. A number of shrubs have berries that ripen in the fall and remain on their branches through winter. This refrigerated fruit is an important food source for frugivorous (fruit-eating) birds. The berry’s pulp is typically rich in carbohydrates and vitamins while the seeds inside are concentrated sources of fat and protein.

Berries are delicious little packets of fruit pulp that attract birds and other wildlife to disperse their seeds. Many berry seeds survive passing through an animal's digestive tract and are dropped in a new place with a bit of fertilizer.

A bird's metabolic rate rises during cold weather to keep it warm, requiring almost continual eating. Birds will seek sheltered spots out of the wind when at rest. Birds often look rounder in winter because they puff up their feathers to trap warm air around their bodies.

Birds tend to band up in protective flocks to stay warm by huddling together and creating "portable" territories with boundaries defined by available food. Once the food is consumed, they move on to another area with abundant seeds and berries. The watchful eyes of a flock can help members stay safe by raising the alarm when a predator is spotted. Domestic cats and birds of prey are among songbirds' main predators.



In winter, large flocks of Bohemian and Cedar Waxwings provide entertainment for onlookers as they gorge themselves on big, frozen Mountain ash berries. Sometimes they will pass berries from bird to bird in order to bond. Grouse, pheasants and quail eat Snowberries found throughout the valley wilderness. But don't eat these berries yourself - they're toxic to us. Other inedible-to-human selections that are eaten by birds include Poison ivy berries, English holly berries, and the fleshy coral-red fruits of the Yew tree.

Do you wonder why some people take up "birding" as a hobby? Grab a pair of binoculars to find out! The variety of colours, markings, shapes, sizes, songs, sounds and characteristics distinguish the wide array of bird species. Getting to recognize each species is like getting to know

friends from a crowd. Discover winter birds by checking online for local Naturalist or Birding Club walks and events. Seed and berry-eating birds such as jays, crossbills, waxwings, finches, sparrows, grosbeaks, chickadees, and nuthatches are easier to spot on winter's leafless trees and shrubs. Scan your binoculars up the trunks of trees in sheltered areas to find them. Young children can make and use toilet paper tube "binoculars". They really help kids spot the birds and learn to use real binoculars later.



There's debate over the feeding wild birds. In urban areas, where native plants have been removed, feeders may be helpful, but they cause birds to congregate in high numbers for longer in one place, and diseases like salmonella can spread. It is critical that feeders are cleaned frequently and any seeds spilled below the feeder are cleaned up, to prevent birds from eating mildewy seed that can make them sick.

It's better to grow the native plants that birds naturally seek out, or leave natural areas for birds and other wildlife to forage, nest, and shelter. We can help birds by observing their natural behaviors and rewilding habitat. Landscaping with native trees, shrubs and flowers to enhance our yards for wildlife is known as *Naturescaping*. Free Naturescaping Guides for BC are available for download in HCTF Education's [eStore](#).

Some bird-favourite native berry species

- ★ Western Mountain Ash (*Sorbus scopulina*)
- ★ Red Osier Dogwood (*Cornus sericea*)
- ★ Arbutus (*Arbutus menziesii*)
- ★ Red Elderberry (*Sambucus racemosa*)
- ★ Black Hawthorn (*Crataegus douglasii*)
- ★ Pin Cherry (*Prunus pensylvanica*)
- ★ Snowberry (*Symphoricarpos albus*)
- ★ Saskatoonberry (*Amelanchier alnifolia*)