

More Teaching Tips

Becoming a Wildlife Lister

by Craig Tufts

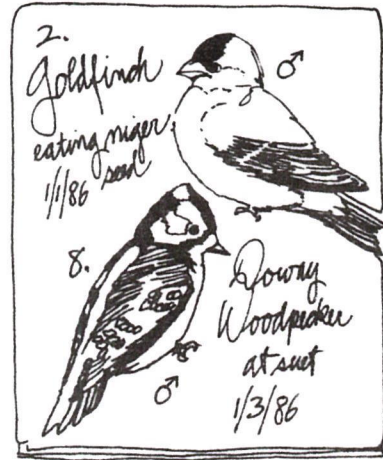
There's no better time than New Year's to resolve to keep track of what's taking place in your yard – with an eye to making it even more inviting to wildlife. If you've never before listed your wildlife observations, winter is an ideal time of year to begin; your yard is fairly quiet and your note-taking can get off to a comfortable, leisurely start.

Watching the comings and going of wildlife visitors is turned into a profitable game when you actually list the changes brought about by the seasons. Begin by making a chart, fastening it to a clipboard to be hung alongside your favorite wildlife-watching window or next to the door you use most between house and yard.

Your behavioral notes can be made in columns (left to right): numbers and names of species; description (especially of species not easily identifiable); date observed; time of day; place (i.e. which part of yard or where outside the yard); and activity (feeding, digging in the garden, nesting, pecking at a dead tree, etc.). If you have a home computer, you might like to set up a data base format for all your information. That's my own method of keeping track of my wildlife observations. The computer makes it easy to see unfolding patterns.

Your lists can cover all kinds of wildlife. Even though birds will be the most common visitor, you'll want to note what goes on in the world of insects, mammals, reptiles and amphibians. Your observations needn't be confined to your immediate yard, but can take in surrounding fields, woods or streets, if you like. Friends of mine consider the space over their house as an extension of their home environment. They've kept track of large birds of prey and migrating waterfowl that would not be apt to ever actually enter their yard, yet are certainly part of their personal world.

Within the last year, as my butterfly garden has developed, I've noted 23 species of butterflies and skippers – in both caterpillar and adult stages. I've even specified what shape each individual is in. My notes tell me for



example, that when most of the tiger swallowtail butterflies take on a faded, tattered look in late June they are near the end of their life span. I discovered, too, that it's late summer before the caterpillars of the variegated fritillaries show up in my area from points south. And just this past October, while checking over my plantings, I noticed small, pale, black-headed, yellow-green caterpillars nesting in the leaves of my native columbines, the tops of which were chewed off. My books told me this was the caterpillar of the locally rare columbine skipper, which feeds only on columbines. It winters in small silk nests among dead columbine leaves and emerges in spring as an attractive little black, beige and white butterfly which will lay eggs on the new spring columbine shoots. I was glad not to have swept the columbine leaves into the compost heap!

Keeping detailed notes and looking through authoritative books for answers to puzzling situations lays the groundwork for identifying patterns of growth and behavior you may never before have known existed. It may be a game or a hobby, but it can also be very helpful in making your yard a better place for welcome wildlife.

Adapted from The Backyard Naturalist by Craig Tufts of the National Wildlife Federation. This regular column is provided free to newspapers around the country. Should you know of local newspapers that might be interested in this feature, contact the National Wildlife Federation, Dept. BN, 1412 16th Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036-2266.

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