

# Frantic February Birds Flock at Feeders

Maybe it's just my imagination but it always seems that the birds get more frantic around the feeders during February. Every bird seems to be on edge—intent on getting their portion of the bounty and not giving way to other birds that are trying to displace them, but also trying to not become food for other larger critters. The comings and goings get to be pretty fast and furious.

It makes some sense if you think about it a bit. The availability of food—whether you are a seed eater or an insect catcher—is lowest at this time of year. Natural sources of seeds have become depleted through December and January and winter keeps insect populations at low or even non-existent levels (though the Phoebe and the Mockingbird seem to do well enough).

Even with 8 feeders here at the Station, there never seems to be enough seed and suet for all the birds. Maybe if I only had 4 feeders out there might only be half as many birds but the fact is that there are more than enough birds to keep all 8 busy. I also know—literally—what it means to pay an “arm and a leg” for bird seed!

Of course, a frantic flock of feeder birds often has other concerns, too. It's bad enough having to share your repast with other birds but squirrels, raccoons and possums can empty a feeder faster than you can say “what was that?! In my mind, I justify my anti-squirrel policy with this logic (but the



*A startlingly yellow male Pine Warbler, *Dendroicus pinus*, visiting a suet feeder. They're quite fond of peanut butter/suet blocks.*

truth is that I just like to watch squirrels do tricks).

Congregations of songbirds and sparrows at feeders also create an almost irresistible draw for bird predators. In our case, these are Red-Shouldered and Sharp-Shinned Hawks. It's always amazing to be doing something in the living room and see, even out of the corner of your eye, the quick flash of a hawk sweep through and the instantaneous scattering of sparrows and finches in every direction.

At town feeders the predators are more liable to be someone's pet cat. The statistics on this have become alarming, to say the least, but from a bird's point of view, one's as bad as the other—dead is dead. Still, it's a preventable tragedy.

From an entirely selfish point of view, having birds to watch at the feeders is a joy shared with coffee on a Sunday morning. This week we added a Field Sparrow (*Spizella pusilla*) and a Savannah Sparrow (*Passerculus sandwichensis*) to our growing list of Sparrows, and now have at least four Pine Siskins (yep, they're starting to exclude the Goldfinches).

There are also at least four pairs of Pine Warblers, a pair of Vireos and a bunch of Kinglets, along with the Downy and Red-Bellied Woodpeckers, visiting the suet feeders—I had to add two more blocks! There may finally be more animal fat hanging in the yard than around my waist (or so I hope).