

A Sense of Wonder...

Winter BIRDS

By Karen McClure

Since numerous birds in West Virginia migrate south in the late summer and early fall, winter is the perfect time to start learning to identify the ones that are winter or year-round residents. With a shorter list of probable birds at your feeder, in your yard or along your hike, it will be easier hopefully to figure out which species you are seeing or hearing.

Below is my favorite recipe for what I call "bird butter," also known as peanut butter suet. I have managed to lure in the elusive brown creeper with this recipe. Actually, I'm pretty sure the other feeder birds helped by scattering small fragments of bird butter below the feeder on the snow and ground, and carrying it to a tree trunk on their feet. The brown creeper was observed many times darting from the base of the tree trunk to the area below the Bird Butter feeder, snacking, and then darting back. If you doubt they dart, you haven't watched a brown creeper.

You will notice that my recipe contains no whole seeds or fruits. I read several years ago that birds can aspirate the suet mixture while trying to eat these larger items, and end up getting sick. So I skip them, and the birds still eat it. In addition to bird butter, I highly recommend black oil sunflower seed as a general bird feed. The seed mixes are often less expensive, but many birders have noted that few birds eat the other seeds in the mixes.

The facing page has bird cards to help you identify the common birds you might see and/or hear in winter in West Virginia. There are two species of chickadees in West Virginia, the Carolina chickadee, and the black-capped chickadee. They are so similar, even experienced birders have trouble telling them apart, so often they note them as "chickadee species." Bird songs are the vocalizations that males use to mark their nesting territory. Some species have more than one song, and a few females sing, too. Calls are vocalizations that birds make for other reasons. Many of these birds are "early singers" so you can catch them singing in the winter.

Although their natural food consists of insects they dig out of trees, downy woodpeckers can be attracted to suet feeders.

Photo by WV Dept. of Commerce/
Steve Shaluta

Bird Butter (peanut butter suet)

1 Cup Vegetable Shortening

1 Cup Peanut Butter

4+ Cups Corn Meal

Melt shortening over medium-low heat. Stir in peanut butter until well mixed. Remove from heat. Stir in 4 cups of corn meal. Add more until mixture resembles mashed potatoes. Pour or spoon onto sheet cake pan to cool. If bird butter does not harden, place in freezer. When butter is solid, cut into blocks to fit suet feeder. Store extra bird butter in the freezer. I cool/store in reusable containers that are the right size to fit in my suet feeder.

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Objectives

Beginning birders have fun hiking to find birds, looking for them in the yard, or watching them at feeders. They learn field marks, vocalizations, size estimation, and map skills.

Method

Children cut out and use the bird cards to find and identify common backyard birds. They measure and weigh bird equivalents. They can make bird butter and fill feeders to attract birds.

Materials

Bird cards, ruler, pencil, journal (optional), kitchen scale (optional), dried beans (optional), drawing paper, binoculars (optional), bird feeders (optional), black oil sunflower seed (optional), and ingredients for Bird Butter (listed below).

Learn how to use binoculars

Look at the bird while holding the binoculars. Then bring the binoculars to your eyes without moving anything but your arms. You should now be able to see the bird through the binoculars if it didn't fly away. Focus if you need to.

For more bird fun, check out:

www.brooksbirdclub.org
www.birdwatchersdigest.com
www.allaboutbirds.org

What to do

1. Cut out and read the bird cards together. Find West Virginia on a map. Find objects that are about the same length as each bird. Note on each card the object you found that matches the bird in length.
2. Look out the windows for the birds. Try all the windows of the house. Note on the cards or in your journal which birds were found at each window.
3. Go out in the yard and look for more birds. Again, note on the card or journal where a specific bird was found.
4. Go on a walk nearby and look for more birds. Note in your journal the ones that aren't on the cards.
5. Put up a seed feeder and fill with black oil sunflower seed. Watch for new birds to note in your journal.
6. Make bird butter and place in a suet feeder or citrus fruit net bag. Hang where you can watch the birds eat the bird butter. Note any new birds in your journal.
7. Draw a picture of each of the birds from the bird cards on a piece of white paper. Place one of the drawings on your kitchen scale. Place beans on the paper until the scale reading equals the weight listed on the bird cards for that bird. Wrap up the birds, tape them shut, and feel the weight in your hands. Birds are lightweights! Or maybe more appropriately – featherweights! Repeat until you have a paper bird for each species.

Option

If you don't have a kitchen scale, you can still make paper birds. Just count the number of dried pinto beans from the chart below to make each paper bird.

Bird	Number of beans
Cardinal	90
Titmouse	45
Chickadee	30
Downy Woodpecker	60
Hairy Woodpecker	120
White-breasted Nuthatch	60
Red-bellied Woodpecker	150



Tufted Titmouse

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Northern Cardinal

Scientific Name: *Cardinalis cardinalis*

Song: 28 songs -- nasal “wha-cheer” or “pretty pretty” most common

Call: nasal “chip”

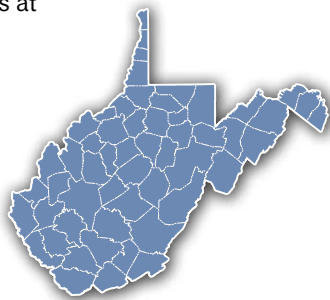
Height: 8-9 inches

Weight: 1.5 ounces

Facts:

- Female Cardinals can sing all 28 songs. Female birds of most species do not sing at all.
- Cardinals can move their crests for sign language.
- Cardinals build several nests and raise several broods a year.
- The oldest cardinal on record lived 28 years, though most live between 4 and 13 years.

Range: Statewide – absent in spruce forest and some northern hardwood areas at high elevations (above 4000 feet).



Chickadee

Scientific Name: *Poecile atricapillus*

Song: whistle-like “pheebee pheebee” or “pheebee pheebee”

Call: low and buzzy “chick a dee dee dee”

Height: 4-6 inches

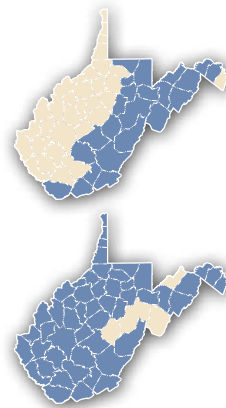
Weight: 0.5 ounces

Facts:

- There are two species of chickadees in West Virginia: the black-capped, and the Carolina.
- It is hard to tell the two species apart if they aren't singing.
- The black-capped is a more northern and high altitude bird, while the Carolina is more southern and lives in lower altitudes.

Range:

- Black-capped chickadee – McDowell, Mercer, Monroe, Summers, Fayette, Greenbrier, Nicholas, Pocahontas, Webster, Randolph, Upshur, Pendleton, Tucker, Grant, Hardy, Barbour, Preston, Taylor, Monongalia, Mineral, Hampshire, Morgan, and Berkeley counties.
- Carolina chickadee – all counties except Mineral, Pendleton, Randolph, and Webster.



White-breasted Nuthatch

Scientific Name: *Sitta carolinensis*

Song: low, whistle-like song

Call: nasal “yank”

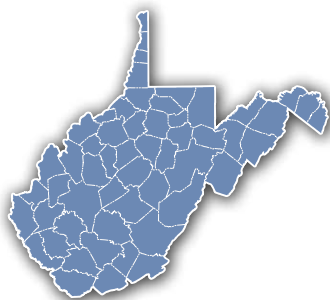
Height: 5-6 inches

Weight: 1 ounce

Facts:

- In West Virginia, we have a red-breasted nuthatch that is a more northern and high- altitude bird than the white-breasted nuthatch.
- White-breasted nuthatches are often moving upside-down, making their way down tree trunks looking for food. When the bird gets low, it often flies up to a high point in another tree, and makes its way down again.

Range: Statewide – wherever there is deciduous forest/trees, but are absent in spruce forest at high elevations.



Red Bellied Woodpecker

Scientific Name: *Melanerpes carolinus*

Song: nasal trill

Call: downward “churr”

Height: 10 inches

Weight: 2.5 ounces

Facts:

- If you make some bird butter, a red-bellied is likely to come and pick up large hunks of the food.
- The female red-bellied woodpecker has a patch of red on the back of her head. The male's red patch stretches from the bill to the base of his neck.
- Red-bellied woodpeckers take food out from under the bark more often than drilling holes.

Range: Statewide.



Chickadee

Poecile atricapillus



Donna Dewhurst

Northern Cardinal

Cardinalis cardinalis



Steve Shaluta

Red Bellied Woodpecker

Melanerpes carolinus



Steve Shaluta

White-breasted Nuthatch

Sitta carolinensis



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