



**My Carolina Wren
tries a suet smoothie**



**Chipping Sparrows and goldfinches are joined
at the buffet line by a female Northern Cardinal**

Brunswick Wildlife Winter Smorgasbord, Backyard Snowbirds!

Last week's story ended with me watching for predicted snow and the return of my Pine Siskins. Neither showed; however, I declared it a "snow day" anyway. Being retired means you can make any day a snow day!

Now let's turn back the hands of time to a real snow day...January 20. What a day! I watched the inauguration out of one eye and my feeders with the other.

Large, wet snow flakes streamed past the birds that covered all feeders, as my slow cooker was simmering a pot of the best chili in recorded history.

Of the nineteen species of birds that dropped by that day, I chose the finch, sparrow, and wren for this week's feature birds. Like Pine Siskins, Purple Finches are noted for southerly irruptions from their normal winter range that are thought to be related to variations in the annual seed crop of elm and ash trees.

In the southeast, winter Purple Finch numbers are heavier in some years than others; however, they are generally uncommon at our feeders. North Carolina's recent Great Backyard Bird Count totals were 3,041 in 2009, 3,081 in 2008, and only 98 in 2007.

The Purple Finch is dimorphic by gender...the male has a raspberry-red plumage and the female is brown-streaked. The House Finch, common in our backyards year-round and more numerous as overwintering birds of this species move in, is sometimes mistaken for a Purple Finch.

If a bird in question does not have brown streaks underneath and even its wings have a raspberry wash, it is a male Purple Finch. A female Purple Finch is easily identified by the bold chocolate face pattern with a white stripe over its eye as seen in the photo. Also, Purple Finches have notched tails and House Finches do not.

The Chipping Sparrow is a small sparrow with an un-streaked breast. Adults have a chestnut cap, white line above their eyes, and black trans-ocular eye stripes. They breed from eastern Alaska through Canada and southward to the southern United States, Mexico, and Central America except for the southern Great Plains, desert southwest, and Florida.

Chipping Sparrows winter in the southern United States, Mexico, and Central America. They are residents of the Lower Cape Fear; however, they are also regional migrants so we enjoy large flocks in winter.

I have a pair of chippies that nest in my yard and I often see them feed their fledglings on the ground. Like many seed eaters, they feed insects to their young because protein is needed for rapid growth. Trust me; it is fun to watch a fledging try to tackle an adult that has a large cricket in its bill.

The Chipping Sparrow has a dry, trilling song...its chipping sound. Last summer, for weeks on end, a male sang from a perch about forty feet up in a pine in my yard. For the first few days, I looked for the rattlesnake I thought I was heard while fetching my newspaper. The sparrow's song resonated between two brick houses!

Fortunately, these sparrows have benefited from the development of North America since the 1880's and their population is stable.

Ounce for ounce, the Carolina Wren is the bird with the most attitude. The mockingbird arguably has the "baddest" attitude because, when defending its territory, it sometimes attacks people, its own reflection in a window, and other birds. And who hasn't seen a mocker terrorize a cat?

The wren, however, weighs about three quarters of an ounce and the mockingbird weighs an ounce more plus the little guy is just as loud.

Over the last three years, Carolina Wrens have nested and provided my wakeup call, displacing mockers, sentinels in previous years.

The Carolina Wren is a non-migratory resident and a habitat generalist. They maintain their territories and pair bonds all year.

In addition to backyards, they may be found in successional scrub; brush in power line easements; bottomlands and cypress swamps; bay pocosins; and almost any patch of woods,

generally preferring wetter areas. In dense cover, given its loud repertoire, it is more likely to be heard than seen.

Wrens eat spiders and other insects almost exclusively; however, they eat some seed and fruit plus suet in winter. They generally forage on or close to the ground but sometimes forage on the trunks and branches of trees like creepers and nuthatches.

In natural areas, Carolina Wrens usually nest in open cavities. In backyards and other human-altered settings, they often build in nooks of houses and unused containers. They generally have multiple broods each year. Both sexes build the nest and males assist greatly with the care of nestlings and fledglings.

Carolina Wren populations are stable and increasing over most of their range. With the warming climate, wrens have greatly expanded northward over the past century.

Our winter wildlife watching is coming to an end; however, I already have a book recommendation for next winter. I have just finished reading *Winter World: the Ingenuity of Animal Survival* by Bernd Heinrich.

His stories tell of unique and miraculous winter survival strategies for a wide range of wildlife from Golden-crowned Kinglets and many other birds to squirrels, honeybees, other insects, bears, and Monarch, Mourning Cloaks, and other butterflies and moths.

Heinrich is a master nature writer, able to impart much about a species' life history in easy-to-read stories against the background of the interconnected elements of their ecosystem and the impact of humans. Without doubt, I will re-read this book next winter!

John Ennis



A female Purple Finch snarls at an incoming Chipping Sparrow



Waiting for the next opening to be seated



Mourning Dove waits for the snow to melt to find its “dovey bag” on the ground