

Backyard Rarities

by Sue Friscia

Ann Minckler couldn't believe her eyes. There on her thistle feeder was a bird that looked like a rainbow. She checked her field guide. Only one bird fit that description, a Painted Bunting. But it didn't belong in her Makanda backyard or for that matter anywhere in the state.

But here it was. She had to share her good fortune, so she quickly called Ben Gelman. He was skeptical at first, but finally agreed to come over to verify the bird. The moment he called the Springfield hotline, folks started dropping by Ann's backyard to see one of North America's most colorful songbirds.

The bunting enjoyed Ann's hospitality from 20 April to 22 April 1993. It was photographed and videotaped for documentation as Illinois' first state record pending approval of the Illinois Ornithological Records Committee. Ann's son commented that she was finally getting the credit she deserved after feeding birds for 22 years.

Ann's yard is landscaped for wildlife. Ruby-throated Hummingbirds drink nectar from her clematis. Orchard Orioles enjoy her peach trees. Bluebirds, a Pileated Woodpecker, Carolina Chickadees, a Blue Grosbeak, and House Wrens have all visited her backyard.

Ann's is not the only Illinois backyard that has attracted great birds. On 30 January 1991, Lisa Granbur looked out her backyard window in Warrenville and was shocked to find

Red Crossbills munching on oilers in her terra-cotta feeding dish. Said Lisa, "I had to be peeled off the ceiling. I was that excited." The crossbill was a lifer for her and it had happened right in her backyard.

Lisa counted three females and two males. They usually came in pairs in the early morning or late afternoon remaining for about 15 minutes. Lisa and her family enjoyed the crossbills until 15 April.

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"1991 was the best winter at my feeders," said Lisa. "Do you want to hear about my Pine Warbler?" It arrived 18 February and stayed until 31 March." According to H. David Bohlen's *Birds of Illinois*, Pine Warblers usually winter in southeastern United States but some have attempted to winter in the southern part of Illinois. Out of nine winter records, only one stayed longer than a day and that was at Crab Orchard National Wildlife Refuge in 1975. Lisa's may

be the only wintering record for northern Illinois.

Again landscaping played a big part in Lisa's successful winter of backyard bird watching. One neighbor has two huge spruce trees and another has a row of evergreens which attracts Pine Warblers and crossbills.

Winter seems the best time to see vagrants at my feeders, too. One day when I focused my binoculars on a bright red spot in my neighbor's bushes thinking it was a male cardinal, it turned out to be an impaled mouse: breakfast for a Northern Shrike. At that time I had no idea how difficult it was to find a shrike in Cook County let alone in a suburban backyard. Unfortunately, the bird did not remain long enough for me to call the hotline and invite you all over.

If you do see an unusual bird at your feeder this winter, or even if you are not sure, call the birding hotline or me. We're happy to help. The hotline number for northern Illinois is 708-571-1522. For the rest of the state, call 217-785-1083.

Drop me a note and tell me about a memorable bird or interesting behavior you have witnessed at your feeders. I look forward to hearing from you. ➤

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