



Yard Birds

Reflections on backyard birding throughout Illinois

by Robert Fisher

Rarities at the feeders:

Have you checked your feeder today for that unanticipated vagrant species? Or that out-of season stray? Stranger things have happened!

Many of us who feed the birds watch and hope for the unexpected: arrival of an unusual bird species, either way out of sync – a summer breeder that should be hundreds if not thousands of miles to the south when it appears at our feeder in January – or way out of place – like a Southwestern sparrow species busily scratching for seeds in the snow right under a platform feeder in late fall or winter.

Sometimes we have very specific target birds in mind. We may maintain nectar feeders well into November or December hoping to attract one of the western hummingbird species that fly slightly off track while heading south. It doesn't have to be a mega-rarity to generate excitement, just some species we've never, or very rarely, spotted in our yard. We faithfully put out seed, suet, fruit, nuts, mealworms or nectar anticipating the thrill of looking out one morning and discovering a really good bird at one of our feeders.

Occasionally we're rewarded. The yard list my wife, Karen, and I maintain has several species which have only appeared once or twice, like the Hooded Merganser female who



in January 2002 trooped up to one of our feeders from the creek (in the midst of the hoard of Mallards who come to feed on the cracked corn we spread on the ground). She stood there, looking bemused, as if to say "OK, where's the fish?" I also remember a bedraggled, forlorn-looking Northern Mockingbird who busily foraged for seed one frigid February day several winters ago. Karen was out grocery shopping and missed the Mocker. But she was here and I was gone on a day in early May almost 20 years ago when a gor-

A Hoary Redpoll visited a thistle sac in Skokie, Cook County in late February 2000. Eric Walters took this photo of a Hoary, at right, with a Common Redpoll, left, in Skokie 20 February 2000.

geous male Yellow-headed Blackbird showed up for a few hours.

There's disappointment too, as we sadly contemplate the decline, then disappearance of one of our favorite birds – Evening Grosbeak – from our late fall feeders. Checking our records, the last Evening Grosbeak here in our yard was on 11 November 1999. Karen and I remember that day very well because a number of Chicago area birders joined us to see it.

In the pantheon of Illinois rare birds, Harris's Sparrow is not at the top of the list (they show up somewhere in the state just about every year). That didn't stop us from being ecstatic when one hung around our feeders for a month in the spring of 1991. It's the rarest bird on our yard list. But a Harris's is small potatoes as a rarity when you compare it with some of the other feeder birds which have made an appearance around the state. Checking the Illinois Ornithological Records Committee's (IORC) archive, I found an impressive list of mega-rarities that graced someone's yard and feeders in the recent past.