



# Yard Birds

## Reflections on backyard birding throughout Illinois

by Robert Fisher

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As I write this column, Karen, my wife, is looking out our dining room window, making notes, counting our winter bird visitors for Cornell's Feederwatch program. During our lunchtime conversation, we speculate about site fidelity among all these birds. How do these winter feeder birds first find our yard? Where did they come from? And how do migratory visitors like juncos find us from one year to the next – if in fact they actually do return?

We believe many of the same birds come back year after year, surviving the rigors of migration and returning to our yard and feeders. We certainly provide a reliable food source (you just need to look at our annual bird seed bills to know that!). We're fortunate to have a yard that provides shelter and a source of water, from a heated birdbath and the tiny creek meandering along the back edge of our yard. That still

doesn't answer the question of how they found us in the first place. Is there a bird grapevine that spreads the word? Or perhaps a marker somewhere on our property, signaling to avian flyovers that it's safe to stop here (like those who rode the rails during the Great Depression used chalk marks to identify homes where the owners were friendly, providing food and shelter in return for work)? Probably not. More likely it's just the noise and activity of our local, resident birds that gets the attention of the more nomadic winter migrants.

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journey north. Adding to their navigation skills, some species are also proving to have considerable adaptability and flexibility in their choice of a destination. Consider the steadily increasing number of Western hummingbirds who now choose to winter where feeders and blossoming plants are being provided in some of the Southeastern states. That adaptability, coupled with those navigation skills, may be a key element in a species' long-term survival, as man's works continue to massively alter our natural landscape.

We ourselves experienced what we believe were examples of winter-feeding site fidelity and adaptability, a couple of years ago. A Hermit Thrush appeared and began eating the sunflower chips below one of our feeders in mid-November. This was a first! We had never before had this thrush species as a regular feeder bird. After eating the chips,