

he/she would hop up on our heated birdbath and take a few sips of water.

We kept expecting the bird to disappear, but the days passed, and the thrush came every day. The weather grew colder, and the thrush's daily visits increased. Karen, knowing thrushes eat berries, decided to provide another food source. She soaked raisins in warm water to plump them. First she just spread the soaked raisins among the chips on the ground, but our resident squirrels quickly scarfed them up, bullying the thrush out of the way. So she began spreading them on top of the squirrel baffle protecting the feeder above. The thrush caught on immediately and would fly directly to the baffle and eat the raisins. If the baffle was empty, the bird would land and look up at our dining room window, as if to ask, "Where the heck are my raisins?"

This continued all winter, the bird disappearing in late March as

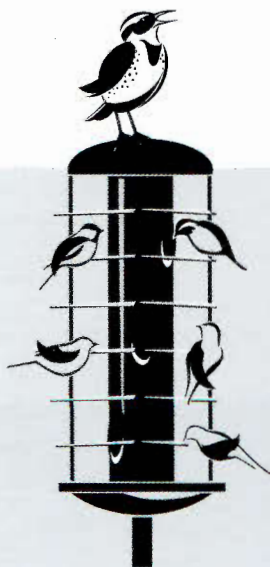
the first signs of spring began to show. You might ask: This is a good example of adaptability, but what does it have to do with site fidelity? Well, the following November, on a cold day when we were both watching the feeders from our dining room window, a Hermit Thrush flew in and landed directly on the squirrel baffle. Some might say coincidence – we prefer to believe the same bird had returned. But the thrush either had lost its taste for raisins or found a better food source, as it only appeared that one time.

When considering the juncos that visit our yard and feeders every winter, we don't notice atypical behavior, as we had in that one particular thrush. Research, however, on juncos and other sparrow species who breed much farther north, then winter around us, shows them to loyally return to a specific nesting location in the spring, much the same as the longer distance neotropical migrants. But little data exists on winter site fidelity of these nomads. Perhaps they don't need a

site-specific winter home, except in the worst winter weather?

All who feed birds have experienced those warm, sunny midwinter days, when as the snow cover retreats, juncos and other feeder sparrows vanish. They're out in the fields and edges, feeding in a more familiar (to them) environment. Then when the cold returns, they're back, scratching at the ground to unearth bits and pieces of the seed we spread. Their winter patch preference may be those very fields and edges where native seeds are abundant, but they still know how to get to the less desirable, but predictable, feeder seed we provide. A winter banding study conducted over several years might be just what's needed to determine whether that junco busily scratching for seed under a feeder – coming back to a proven food source – is the same bird as last year. Any volunteers from our banders?

— Robert Fisher
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Artwork by Jenny Vogt.

Yard Birds

I'd welcome your feedback on this column, as it may become a regular feature in the Meadowlark. I'd especially like your yard and feeder bird stories and observations, which we can build into future columns. The editor and I both hope we can make this column a place where IOS members who enjoy backyard birding can share their experiences. Send me your observations, interesting visitors and the like. That's why the column subtitle is: Reflections on backyard birding throughout Illinois.

You can reach me at: bfisher928@aol.com or by phone at 630-985-2956. Tell me your story and I'll write it down. I look forward to hearing from you.