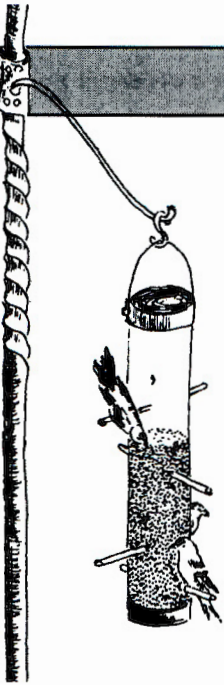


## Backyard Birds in the Amazing 1996 Spring



by Sue Friscia

It was the best of times and the worst of times. The spring of 1996. Songbirds literally blanketed the ground desperately trying to stay alive, scouring under every leaf to find the few insects that survived a series of abrupt weather changes, including unusually cold temperatures. Unfortunately, many birds didn't survive. I spotted a Yellow-rumped Warbler in the grass, and picked it up, hoping the warmth of my hands would revive it. But it was too late. Then there was the Ovenbird I discovered frozen solid, at the base of a tree. I received a call from a fisherman who was beside himself with worry: swallows were flying into cars and the road was littered with fluttering bodies. He wanted the road closed and so did I, but no one listened.

Fortunately, many people don't stop stocking their feeders when spring comes. These people were rewarded with spectacular sights. I saw flocks, no exaggeration, flocks of Rose-breasted Grosbeaks fighting for a position on my sunflower feeder.

I'm usually lucky to see *one* each season. White-crowned Sparrows occasionally winter, but now my backyard high count is 20. Then I spotted a tiny sparrow trying to muscle in with the White-crowns. I assumed it was a Chipper but with the help of my trusty binoculars, I noticed a gray nape and a whitish streak down the center of his head as well as an ear patch. It was a Clay-colored Sparrow, a first for my yard. I was so excited, I confided my great find to our Editor, Sheryl DeVore, who was also excited because she had seen two Clay-colored Sparrows on her front lawn in Mundelein, not to mention the Connecticut Warbler she heard singing in her Norway spruce while she was sitting in her living room. The bird flew to her next-door neighbor's honeysuckle, and while she stood on her driveway, she watched it sing for a good 10 minutes. Her sister, Laurel

Ann Kaiser, even had Yellow-headed Blackbirds in her Mundelein backyard in a five-year-old subdivision built atop a cornfield.

The best yard bird I "almost" saw this spring had to be the Green-tailed Towhee (see photo and story on page 122) that showed up in Arlene Brei's yard just east of Rockford. When Brei discovered the bird, she knew it was something she had never seen before. She finally found a match in "Land Birds East of the Rockies", a 1923 guide by Chester R. Reed. Brei begins each morning in spring birding by ear, and usually doesn't get out of bed until she has counted 20 species. She told me the towhee started singing at dawn every day, except the day I was there to try to add it to my list. But I can't complain. I enjoyed Brei's yard filled with bluebirds, grosbeaks, and orioles.



*Harris' Sparrow, backyard feeding station, Will Co. 11 May 1996. Photo by Joe Milosevich.*