

Mecklenburg Audubon Society



Bird Behavior: Keeping Warm

BIRDIE IT'S COLD OUTSIDE!

The key to survival for a bird in winter is the same as for every animal that must endure cold weather. It needs to maintain an adequate body temperature by getting enough food each day and by protecting itself against the cold at night. It also must remain alert to avoid becoming food for another animal that is also trying to survive. To do this they have developed several survival strategies:



MIGRATION:

When food supplies are inadequate, birds are forced to migrate to locations where food is available.

DIET CHANGES:

Birds must eat richer food in winter to boost their metabolism. Woodpeckers, which are primarily insect eaters, will adapt their winter diets to include beef suet and seeds when available at feeding stations.

INCREASE THE AMOUNT THEY EAT:

They eat, and eat, and eat, and eat. Much like we do over the holidays. However, because they have such high metabolisms to maintain a high body temperature (between 105-107° F) they burn most of their food up very quickly in cold weather. Many birds eat 1/3 to 1/2 of their weight a day in high-energy foods such as sunflower seeds and suet. Since food is scarcer in the winter they spend most of their day eating!



CACHING/HOARDING:

When an abundant food source such as your feed is discovered, birds will eat their fill and then take more for hoarding. Jays are notorious for caching seeds and nuts, but other birds such as chickadees, nut-hatches, and raptors do it as well.

FLOCKING:

Various species of winter songbirds often gather into mixed flocks when foraging for food. A larger number of birds find more food and they enjoy better protection from predators than do individual birds.

FLUFFING:

When the cold becomes a major obstacle to survival, nearly all species of birds fluff their feathers for better insulation which prevents the loss of body heat.

