Watching a Blue Jay gulp down sunflower seeds, my husband decided to start counting - wondering how many he could hold! Turns out this Blue Jay stuffed down 37 more sunflowers before flying off. A few minutes later, the same bluejay (we think) returned and gulsed down 39! (submitted by Cindy Jeffrey)

Northern Blue Jays eat mainly seeds. Different from other birds, it will fill its gullet with seeds and then fly off to some secret and protected area where it regurgitates the seeds and cracks each one open before eating it. Blue Jays also eat insects, eggs and young birds. (submitted by Annie Baker - From Cleveland Museum of Natural History, http://www.cmnh.org/

Betcha can’t eat just one!
Blizzards say it’s winter in their own blinding way, but when night has come clearly then nothing proclaims the season more strongly than the array of constellations that cross the evening sky at this time of year. Nearly all are brightly lit, especially Orion with the Big Dog (sporting Sirius, the brightest star) leaping behind him on center stage south. Just to westward and above Orion, Taurus’ bright eye (Aldebaran) and dotted V-shaped face make it easy to include the sprinkling of the Pleiades on his shoulder. Pentagonal Auriga (with the gleaming Capella) and shapeless Perseus and the M or W of Cassiopeia are to the NE and N, and all three are in or mostly in the Milky Way. It now reaches from SE to NW, and though its myriad members appear a little dimmer now than its summer crowd, it is plainly in its usual winter place. Castor and Pollux distinctly locate Gemini upward and behind Orion, with lonely but prominent Procyon of the Little Dog south of them. And coming over the eastern horizon will be Regulus, the leading light of Leo. It’s a sky of bright stars, which may be why the much more demure Andromeda and Pegasus are both settling away in the west. She is stretching beneath Cassiopeia to cling to a trailing corner of his Great Square. The little cluster of Aries is tagging long south of the trailing hem of Andromeda’s gown.

That said, what are winter’s natural symbols when blizzard-free daylight returns? I vote for the deciduous trees, holding up their arrays of naked, solid curves and delicate interweavings, and making a display complementary with the conifers’ wealth of stolid, enduring green.

Most of the latter hereabouts are eastern red cedars (Juniperus virginiana, the last part I guess because Europeans first reported them around the Jamestown colony) once valued for fences and as pencil wood, and the berries of its species are still a requisite of gin. And hereabouts one is bold to say a kind word about them, for these hardy colonizers of sparse soils can overrun pastures if given a chance.

A neighbor once spray-killed a steep embankment of them, to be rewarded with a doubling of sprouts, so that area is again cedar-covered (which may explain why the Juniper part apparently derives from a combination of Latin words for ‘young’ and ‘produce’). That particular bluff is interesting in that it’s hidden away by the tall hardwoods that line the creek at its base in summer, but re-emerges to greenly stitch the earth to the sky’s hem in winter, and to form a rich backdrop for the early-showing plum whites and redbud purple-pinks of spring.

Maligned though they are, our cedars provide a strong break, and brake, regarding the north winds of winter, shelter for the remnant quail, decorative galls that would otherwise have to no place to hang out, and the general benefits of variety.

Variety is also one of the benefits received from the Quadrantid meteor shower that could be something to see or not much on the 4th, and from the planets who come and go variously amid the rigidly scheduled stars. Actually, there’s no longer a constellation regarded as resembling a mariner’s quadrant, though the name remains; look for the streaks to emanate from Bootes, off the end of the Big Dipper’s handle. And though this month gets along without the eye-catching Venus, Mars glows brightly starting early in Leo but gradually migrating “backwards” into later-rising Cancer, there coming its closest on the 27th, and The Old Farmers’ Almanac says that from high up on the 29th it will outshine every star but Sirius.

Out west, opposite to Mars’ risings, Jupiter offers his brief farewells while shifting gradually from Capricorn to later-setting Aquarius, thereby locating the barely discernible saucer-like presence of the former, then the scarcely noticeable octopus shape of the latter. Meanwhile Saturn rises every evening in Virgo who follows Leo, but keeps his rings turned edgewise to us giving a dimmed show, though not so dim as Mercury, who, like Venus is not there at all, on winter vacation. The Moon will be new the 15th at 1a11, and full the 30th at 12a18.

© 2010 Peter Zachary Cohen
She lay still, in a run for her life that abruptly ended. Her dark legs were frozen in an elegant dash, clean nails on her toes exposed in a last ditch effort to grip the road's smooth surface. An amber eye looked vacantly ahead. Her black tipped ears, soft triangles of alertness, last heard the rush of wind as the vehicle smacked into her abdomen. Her golden orange coat, colored like fall oaks, was torn where the tire hit her, but otherwise she was the perfect red fox.*

I picked her up and laid her carefully in the bed of the truck,** unsure of what I would do with her, but sure I did not want her smeared into the roadbed to join all the other grease spots I'd seen there. I had planned initially to bury her, to show some reverence for her life, but somehow I could not bring myself to throw soil on her beautiful body – dead or not. I had never skinned an animal, but I had read about how it was done. Would that be irreverent as well? I knew I would not wear her fur, but getting it dirty and wet, and hiding it in a forgotten grave, was not a pleasant option either.

I laid her on a wooden picnic table where three cats gathered to watch. This female – called a vixen – had been lactating: I found one tumescent teat tucked in the soft, grey fur of her belly. Was a half-grown kit out there, waiting for her? In all likelihood, no, as the young disperse after six to eight months, and being born in February in our area, they would have left. Perhaps this one found dependence on her more to his liking than independence in the wild. (A friend, living in a heavily wooded area in town, watched a mother and her seven kits for months, then, one day they simply vanished – all of them.)

I began where her pelt had been obliterated by the tire and, using a single edge razor blade, separated the fur from the rosy bundles of muscle that once animated her lithe body. She was just as perfect beneath her fur. I worked slowly and carefully toward her tail and found the anal gland that all canines have. A fluid seeped out, but I detected no overwhelming odor, although the cats acted as if they did, and began sniffing the air. I separated her bushy tail from her body. Then, I just as carefully moved up to her chest and back, stopping at her neck. Pearl-like ribs shone through the membrane covering them and her striated muscles.

I was in awe of how beautiful every part of her was. She did not bleed, so my novice attempt was acceptable anyway. Two palm size pieces of pelt and her tail were all I took, leaving most of her furred. I dusted them with cornmeal and laid them in the shed to dry.

My big dog and I took her in a cart to the edge of the far woods and laid her in a small clearing, piling limbs and twigs on her, leaving her in an environment she would have been accustomed to, had she lived. I murmured a few inept words, then glumly walked home, my dog by my side, feeling my mood.

Through the years, if I had recovered and skinned just a portion of all the road kills I’d come across, there would be enough to cover all the beds in the village. Wouldn’t a blanket like that be preferable to Wilt Chamberlain’s king size coverlet of wolf noses? I suppose we should be grateful for Eisenhower and Al Gore’s father for bringing to fruition the Interstate Highway System in the 1950s: we’ve all found it speeds us toward our desired destination – but, at what a cost. ***

© 2009 Dru Clarke Nov. 2009

* The red fox has color variations. The blue, black, or silver fox is a color phase that comprises about 10% of the population. My husband Mike saw one in Pottawatomie County and was startled by its incredible beauty. The fox, an omnivore, is a ubiquitous animal, found on all continents except Antarctica.

**Important to note: I possess a salvage permit from KDWP, so can legally pick up roadkills.

***I went to the shed to check on the drying fur often. Today, only the tail remained. It made me smile to think the larger soft pieces would be warming a nest of pack rats, glitter weavers, who know the true value of the fox.
Top 10 Winter Bird Feeding Mistakes to Avoid

by Bill Thompson, III (www.birdwatcherdigest.com)

If you feed the birds in your yard, you probably know that there are some things that work and others that fail miserably. In the spirit of David Letterman’s famous Top Ten Lists, here are the Top Ten Winter Bird Feeding Mistakes to Avoid.

10. **Filling your tube feeder with mixed seed.** If you do this, all the seed will run out onto the ground, making the sparrows, pigeons, and blackbirds very happy. Solution: Use sunflower seed instead.

9. **Ground feeding in the same place all winter.** If you scatter seed on the ground all winter in one place, you will create a stinky, messy, unhealthy zone that will be hard to clean up in the spring. Solution: Change feeding spots several times, especially during wet weather.

8. **Ignoring feeder hygiene.** Yes, it’s cold outside, but dirty feeders can still make birds sick. Solution: Wash your feeders at least monthly in a light (9:1) water-to-bleach solution. Rinse thoroughly and allow to air dry.

7. **Buying your seed at the grocery store.** OK, some stores do sell good seed mixes, but most just sell cheap mixes. And there’s a reason this seed is so cheap. Solution: Read the label. The ingredients should be sunflower, millet, and cracked corn. If wheat, milo, barley, and other seeds are listed as main ingredients, get your seed elsewhere.

6. **Feeding last year’s leftover seed.** Seed, like any other food, ages. Moths and weevils eat the seed. If your old seed is full of cobwebs, it’s been invaded by flour moths and is no good. Solution: Throw it out and get new seed.

5. **No feeder variety.** Ground feeding is fine, but many birds prefer to use hanging or raised feeders. If you’re feeding on the ground and are wondering where the chickadees, nuthatches, and woodpeckers are, try this: Solution: Use hanging feeders (hopper style, or tube or satellite feeders) and limit the ground feeding; you’ll soon get some other, smaller songbirds to visit your feeders.

4. **Believing that no thistle seed means no goldfinches.** This is not true. Sure, goldfinches, siskins, and other finches love thistle (or niger) seed. But it’s an expensive seed to offer exclusively. Solution: All these species will come readily to feeders that stock only black-oil sunflower seed. Augment this with thistle if you wish.

3. **Feeding birds lots of stale bread.** The birds may seem to love your stale bread, but bread to a hungry bird is like popcorn is to a hungry human: Lots of filler, but no real nutritional value. Bread also attracts mostly starlings and house sparrows. Solution: Offer apples, oranges, meat scraps, rendered suet, mealworms, or other nutritional foods instead.

2. **Trying to baffle squirrels.** Losing the squirrel wars? Solution: Offer dried corn, either cracked or still on the ear, elsewhere in your yard, away from your bird feeders. You might distract the squirrels for an entire day. And you might learn to love them!

1. **Taking down your feeder so the birds will migrate.** It is simply not true that your feeders keep birds from migrating. (By the way, hummingbirds don’t migrate on the backs of geese, either.) Birds that migrate know when to leave. Your feeders, no matter how nice and well-stocked they are, will not delay a migrant sparrow, finch, or grosbeak for even one second. Solution: Feed birds all year long if you like doing so. And don’t worry, be happy!

---

**E-Newsletter:** If you wish to opt out of the “paper” Prairie Falcon newsletter and get it on-line as a pdf - send your name and email address to Jacque Staats - staats@wildblue.net
SAVE THE DATES:

**FEB. 13 - 3RD ANNUAL BACKYARD FEEDER TOUR**
(more info in Feb. newsletter)

**FEB. 12-15 GREAT BACKYARD BIRD COUNT**
www.birdsource.org/gbbc

**APRIL 23 - WAKEFIELD BIRDING FESTIVAL**
www.kansasbirdingfestival.org/

---

**Sandhill Crane Migration Focus of 40th Annual Rivers & Wildlife Celebration**
by Kevin Poague, Audubon Nebraska

The 40th annual Rivers and Wildlife Celebration will be held **March 18-21, 2010, in Kearney, Nebraska.** Organized by Audubon Nebraska and the Nebraska Bird Partnership, the conference gathers together nature enthusiasts from across the county to witness the migration of over half a million sandhill cranes and millions of waterfowl and other birds through central Nebraska. Events include guided field trips, workshops, a family fun room, and daily visits to river blinds operated by Audubon’s Rowe Sanctuary for up-close views of cranes roosting on the Platte River.

Local and national speakers will present information on a variety of wildlife and conservation topics. Main speakers are Scott Weidensaul, author of more than two dozen natural history books, including *Living on the Wind: Across the Hemisphere with Migratory Birds,* a Pulitzer Prize finalist; Mike Forsberg, nature photographer and author of *Great Plains: America’s Lingering Wild,* Ron Klataske, executive director of Audubon of Kansas; and Chris Wood, eBird Project Leader, Cornell Lab of Ornithology. More than twenty local environmental organizations will have information booths and hands-on activities on Saturday.

The celebration is open to the general public. Registration materials can be found beginning in mid-December at www.nebraska.audubon.org. Or contact Audubon Nebraska to be put on the mailing list: Nebraska@audubon.org; 402-797-3201. Rowe Sanctuary has information about viewing the sandhill crane migration, 308-468-5282; www.rowesanctuary.org.

---

**Bird Feeders Speed up Evolution –**

---

Did you miss the Whooping Cranes at Cheyenne Bottoms and Quivira NWR in November? According to Kansas Wildlife and Parks, in 1941, there were only 16 wild whooping cranes in existence. Today, the number of wild cranes has been increasing, and is estimated to be more than 300. Whooping cranes are rare Kansas visitors twice a year. Mike Blair, KDWP, captured these magnificent birds on video at, [http://www.kdwp.state.ks.us/news/KDWP-Info/KS-Outdoors-Today/Wednesday-November-11-2009](http://www.kdwp.state.ks.us/news/KDWP-Info/KS-Outdoors-Today/Wednesday-November-11-2009)

---

Photo of Sandhill Crane by Deb Clark taken at Cheyenne Bottoms
Subscription Information: Introductory memberships - $20/yr., then basic membership is $35/yr. When you join the Northern Flint Hills Audubon Society, you automatically become a member of the National Audubon Society and receive the bimonthly Audubon magazine in addition to the Prairie Falcon newsletter. New membership applications may be sent to Treasurer, NFHAS, P.O. Box 1932, Manhattan, KS 66505-1932. Make checks payable to the National Audubon Society. Questions about membership? Call 1-800-274-4201 or email the National Audubon Society join@audubon.org.

If you do not want to receive the national magazine, but still want to be involved in our local activities, you may subscribe to the Prairie Falcon newsletter for $15/yr. Make checks payable to the Northern Flint Hills Audubon Society, and mail to: Treasurer, NFHAS, P.O. Box 1932, Manhattan, KS 66505-1932.

RARE BIRD HOTLINE: For information on Kansas Birds, subscribe to the Kansas Bird Listserve. Send this message <subscribe KSBIRD-L> to <listserve@ksu.edu> and join in the discussions.

Contacts for Your Elected Representatives (anytime) Write, call or email:
Governor Mark Parkinson: 2nd Floor, State Capital Bldg., Topeka, KS 66612.
KS Senator or Representative: State Capital Bldg., Topeka, KS 66612. Ph# (during session only) Senate - 785-296-7300. House - 785-296-7500. U.S. Senator Roberts <Roberts@senate.gov> U.S. Senate, Washington DC 20510. or Brownback <Brownback@senate.gov> U.S. Capital Switchboard 202-224-3121.