



*Feathered Friends*  
*of Winter*

*Photos by Jeff Nadler*  
*Text by Dave Nelson*



## *Short, brisk days and long, cold nights of winter*

can confine even the heartiest of souls. Donning another layer, we take pleasure in the hearth, warm drink, and the company of friends.

Friends of the feathered variety are all around us at this time of year, and a feeder brings them closer to our homes. If we know where to look, and what to look for, we can grow to appreciate more deeply those with whom we share our snowy surroundings.

In that vein, the *Conservationist* presents herein a compendium of winter birds common to most of New York

State, with one or two others thrown in for good measure. Through the patient and talented eye of photographer Jeff Nadler, we enjoy detail missed by the casual observer.

Are there others than those included here? Absolutely! But we'll mark those for another day.

Meanwhile, as the sun arcs ever so slightly higher in the southern sky, we'll watch—and we'll listen—for the unmistakable song of a chickadee, or a titmouse, or a cardinal, heralding the return of spring.



black-capped chickadee



### **Black-capped Chickadee:** *Poecile atricapillus*

Members of the titmouse family (Paridae), small, plump, and aggressive chickadees are full of personality. They are acrobatic as they dance around tree branches, never staying in one place for long. Their black bib and cap, combined with their white cheeks, gives their faces a striking appearance. Their loud “bi-dee-dee-dee” call belies their small size. On sunny days, a loud, whistled “phee-phurr” (first note higher) welcomes spring. In summer, they nest in tiny cavities in tree trunks or hollow limbs. They can be found throughout New York year-round. At feeders, they prefer black oil or striped sunflower seeds.

**Nature Note:** If you are patient, you can train chickadees to eat from your hand. Naturally inquisitive and bold, they will eventually light on, and take seed from your open hand, especially if you stand still near a birdfeeder they frequent.

### **Blue Jay:** *Cyanocitta cristata*

Bold, raucous and clever birds, blue jays are members of the crow family, Corvidae. They can be found throughout New York year-round. Larger than a robin, a blue jay adds a dazzling splash of color to New York’s winter landscape. When agitated, it holds its blue crest erect. A single “flight feather” from a blue jay is beautiful, with a striking combination of blue, black and white. Their calls are well known: a screaming “jay” call and another that mimics the sound of a hand-operated water well pump. Blue jays can eat a large quantity of food at feeders, making them less welcome to some birdwatchers.

**Nature Note:** I once trapped blue jays at my birdfeeder to help a friend with a study she was conducting. While I thought perhaps five or six blue jays were frequenting my feeder, I caught (and later released) more than twenty blue jays at that one spot in a matter of a few days!



### **White-breasted Nuthatch:** *Sitta carolinensis*

Much larger than its cousin the red-breasted, a white-breasted nuthatch has a black cap, white face, and slaty blue-gray back. Its call is a loud, nasal “Ank!” Nuthatches feed by carefully inspecting and removing seeds and insects from cracks and furrows of bark on trunks and branches of trees.

**Nature Note:** Nuthatches will store seeds from a feeder in the bark of trees for later use when food is not as plentiful.



### Downy Woodpecker: *Picoides pubescens*

Small birds with striking patterns of black and white on the back, downies are found on tree trunks supporting themselves in part with their stiff tail feathers. Similar to their somewhat larger cousins the hairy woodpeckers, male downies have a small red patch on the back of their heads. Like all woodpeckers, downies strike the same spot repeatedly with their bill, to excavate holes in soft wood for roosting and nesting sites, and to find insects to eat. At winter feeders, they will eat suet and sunflower seed. A sharp, ringing, descending alarm call announces a downy woodpecker is in the neighborhood.

**Nature Note:** The central shaft or “rachis” of each tail feather is overdeveloped and very strong; in fact, when the tail feathers are held against the trunk of a tree, they act as a brace to help support the weight of the bird.

### Carolina Wren: *Thryothorus ludovicianus*

New York’s largest wren, the Carolina wren is the size of a small sparrow. Its white eyestripe, long tail held up at a cocked angle, and unmistakable, oft-repeated, “teakettle-teakettle-teakettle” call announce its presence. Data from the 1985 and 2005 breeding bird atlases confirm the Carolina wren is expanding its range northward up the mid-Hudson Valley and into western New York. Populations at the northern edge of their range decrease southward after harsh winters. They dine almost exclusively on insects, which limits their winter range to southern parts of New York.

**Nature Note:** Boisterous and loud, a Carolina wren is easy to identify from a great distance by its call. Once, while talking on the phone to a colleague in Maine (where Carolina wrens are uncommon), a wren was calling so loudly near the open window that my friend asked what bird was making that music!



### Fox Sparrow: *Passerella iliaca*

New York’s largest sparrow, fox sparrows have a striped breast, a reddish tail and a wash of gray about the face and neck. Fox sparrows are so named because their coloration mimics that of a red fox, *Vulpes vulpes*. While they generally breed to our north and winter to our south, some can be found wintering in southern New York. Look for fox sparrows alone or in very small groups on the ground under feeders in late winter as they begin their northward migration.

**Nature Note:** Fox sparrows feed by kicking backwards with both feet, uncovering seeds in the leaf litter or snow.



### Red-breasted Nuthatch: *Sitta canadensis*

A black eye stripe, blue-gray back, and rusty underparts separate this small nuthatch from others. Its call note sounds like a tiny toy horn. Nuthatches glean seeds and insects from cracks and furrows in older tree bark as they walk down a tree trunk head-first.

**Nature Note:** Inquisitive by nature, a red-breasted nuthatch will approach fairly closely if you stand perfectly still.

### Tufted Titmouse: *Baeolophus bicolor*

A relative of the chickadee, the gray, mousy, tufted titmouse looks something like a cross between a chickadee and a blue jay. With a blue-gray crest and back, large dark eyes, and buff-colored underparts, the titmouse is unmistakable. The two breeding bird atlases of New York State show that titmice are expanding their range westward and northward, perhaps aided by winter feeders. They are found throughout New York, except the north country. Like chickadees, titmice are cavity nesters, and like cardinals, they are shy at feeders.

**Nature Note:** Another bird whose call heralds the coming of spring, its call is a loud, whistled “pbeer-pbeer-pbeer.”



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female goldfinch



### American Goldfinch: *Spinus tristis*

Small, brightly colored birds with a large, conical “finch” bill, American goldfinches are sometimes mistaken for canaries by some people. In flight, these finches undulate, and their “per-tee-dee-dee” call (second syllable emphasized), is choreographed to emphasize the undulation. Goldfinches can be found throughout New York year-round. They prefer nyjer (thistle) seed, so if you want to see them, hang a thistle or nyjer feeder in your yard.

**Nature Note:** Males’ plumage undergoes impressive change throughout the year, from bright gold in summer to drabber gray-green in winter, which females exhibit year-round. They nest later than most other songbirds, in mid to late summer when thistle down is available, which they use as nesting material.

male goldfinch molting into summer plumage



male cardinal



### Northern Cardinal: *Cardinalis cardinalis*

The unmistakable brilliant red, crested, black-faced male cardinal is a favorite of birdwatchers. Cardinals are sexually dimorphic: males and females do not look alike. Females are much browner, with a splash of red-orange on the wings, tail and head. Perhaps aided by bird feeders, cardinals are expanding their range northward, especially along Lake Ontario’s eastern shores and into the St. Lawrence Valley. Ground feeders, they often feed under birdfeeders, picking through seeds that other birds spill. Cardinals are a bit timid at feeders; they may be the first to leave at the slightest disturbance. Cardinals have several well-known songs, including “birdy-birdy-birdy” and “What cheer, what cheer, what?” sung loudly from a conspicuous perch.

**Nature Note:** When a friend and I were banding birds at Cornell University’s Arnot Teaching and Research Forest, we nicknamed cardinals “Cardinalis vice-grippius,” for their painfully strong beaks and proclivity for biting the fingers of the unwary biologist.

**Jeff Nadler** works in finance for General Electric in Schenectady. More of Jeff’s excellent avian portraiture can be viewed on his website at [www.jnphoto.net](http://www.jnphoto.net).

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female cardinal



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