Birding Through the Seasons
January

Jacob Dingel/PGC Photo

Pine Siskin

The start of our calendar year falls at the low ebb of bird activity in Pennsylvania. The number of species in any given area depends largely on the severity of the winter. Being the coldest month, along with accumulating snow, only the hardiest of birds remain in January. Any lingering migrants are generally driven south by the first week of the year. The remaining birds are hardy, tolerant of cold, and able to find seeds or dormant insects despite the cold and snow. Topping the list of cold hardy, resident birds are juncos, chickadees, nuthatches, titmice, finches, song sparrows, blue jays, a few woodpeckers, and the ever-present crow, house sparrow and starling. Some game birds, such as the Ring-necked Pheasant, Ruffed Grouse and Wild Turkey, also stay with us for the winter. Some ducks may linger around or even reside here the whole winter, provided there is open water.

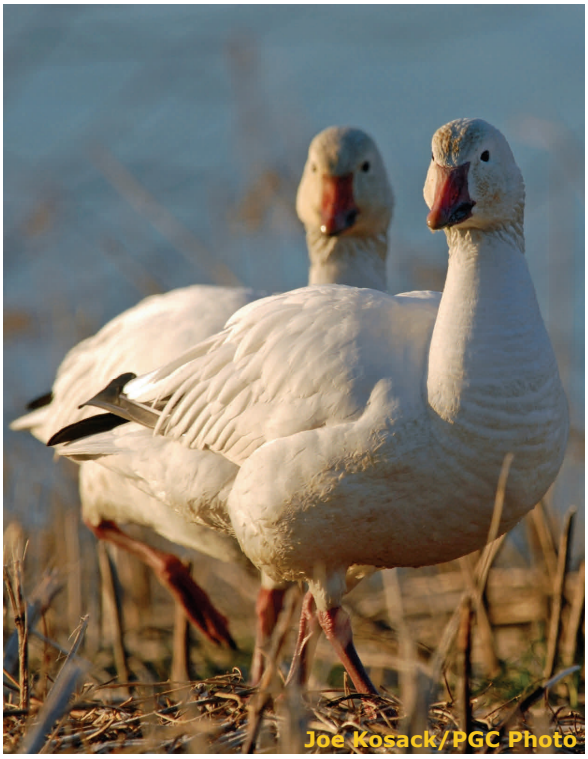
Even though the vast majority of birds have left the state for warmer regions, birding in January can still be enjoyable and rewarding. Some of the most conspicuous and charismatic birds are most easily seen in the winter months [see article: Winter Highlight Birds of Open Country]

Red Crossbill

Jacob Dingel/PGC Photo

Several species only occur in Pennsylvania during the winter. This is because these birds breed in the far reaches of northern Canada, Alaska, and the Arctic Islands, and they find their "warmer region" here in Pennsylvania. These include the American Tree Sparrow, Rough-legged Hawk, Snow Bunting, Redpolls, Lapland Longspur, Snowy Owl, Northern Shrike, Tundra Swan, and Snow Goose. Pine Siskins, Evening Grosbeaks, and crossbills also are seen more often in winter, but these birds are permanent residents in Canada and the New England states and edge their way into Pennsylvania in years with reduced food. The others are irregular and sporadic in occurrence, or occur only in certain areas of the state, and are a real treat for any birder to see.

One of the best places to see winter birds is at bird feeders, where about 35 species may come to feed, such as Northern Cardinal, House Finch, American Goldfinch, Tufted Titmouse, chickadees, Pine Siskin, American Tree Sparrow, White-breasted Nuthatch, several woodpeckers, and Blue Jay. A variety of seeds assure that an interesting mix of birds may be seen. See the separate page on bird feeding for more tips on Bird Table-Setting. The introduced house finch is probably the most common, followed by the American Goldfinch in its drab winter garb. The Pine Siskin can be confused for a goldfinch, for it looks like a "goldfinch in camouflage." Siskins act much like goldfinches and often flock with them. Siskins, however, have very thin beaks and streaky plumage. American Tree Sparrows look like summer chipping sparrows with their chestnut-colored cap but have a dark spot on their chest, rufous eye-line and shoulder patches, and a two-toned beak. The native Purple Finch, also seen at bird feeders, looks like the House Finch but the males are more rose- or wine-colored over their whole head and on their backs and wings, and the female Purple Finch has a distinct white eyebrow stripe. Some say that male Purple Finches are dipped in raspberry sauce while House Finches were dipped in strawberry. Purple Finches have a bigger headed, bulkier look than House Finches and lack streaking on their flanks. Other good places to see birds are unfrozen bodies of water, shrubby fields and manured fields.



Bird life varies markedly across the state, responding to the conditions typical of the region. The northwestern corner, with its notorious snowfall, is almost devoid of bird life except at Lake Erie. The northern mountains may seem lifeless in mid-winter, except for the occasional chickadee's plaintive note or the tapping of a woodpecker. The southwestern and southeastern corners of the state host the greatest variety of birds through the winter. Here, White-throated Sparrows may be abundant in brushy corners. Rivers and lakes may hold ducks and geese, provided they are not frozen over. Large flocks of Tundra Swans and Snow Geese sometimes congregate along the lower Susquehanna River or at Middle Creek Wildlife Management Area, in Lancaster County.

Joe Kosack/PGC Photo

Even before January begins, many gulls occupy area lakes and rivers, especially those near the area landfills or large shopping areas, where they can be seen in parking lots. Late in the month a few permanent residents may start to sing again, especially Northern Cardinals, Song Sparrows, and Tufted Titmice, and the cheery buoyant song of the Carolina Wren heard any time of year, is particularly welcome on a sunny January day! On warm sunny days, male Eastern Bluebirds will start singing and bluebird pairs will begin checking out nest boxes. The long dark nights of January form the heart of the nesting season for Great Horned Owls that are hooting each evening, often starting about a half-hour before dusk. The deeper hoots are the smaller male owl and the higher pitched hoots belong to the larger female.

Open water and brushy fields provide some of the best birding. Birds concentrate around feeding stations statewide in winter, so common and rare species alike are often found at feeders. Areas where there are persistent wild fruits and berries also are great places to find birds of all kinds.

Dan Brauning
Pennsylvania Game Commission
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