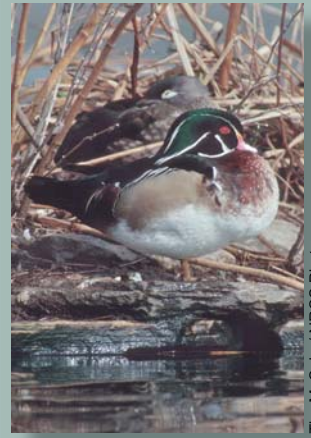


# Where Do Birds Sleep At Night... and Other Avian Questions



Tim McCabe/NRCS Photo

*Editor's Note: Former DNR wildlife biologist Russ McClain gathered together answers to some of the most often asked questions about birds.*

## Where do birds go at night?

Birds tend to sleep in the same areas they inhabit during the day. To protect against predation, many birds will sleep in a way that enhances their security within this habitat. Water birds will sleep sitting or standing in the water or on predator-free islands. Many other birds, such as horned larks, quail and sparrows, sleep on the ground in dense vegetation. Birds which nest in cavities tend to sleep in their trees, chimneys, or in nest boxes far away from many predators. It is no accident that the majority of bird species, including those that are not regular tree-dwellers, prefer to sleep in trees or dense shrubs. There they are out of reach of predators which cannot climb and are warned by vibrations of other carnivores long before they are a danger.

Sleeping habits can also change with the seasons. For instance, territorial birds often sleep in their territory (including on the nest) during the breeding season but thereafter may sleep communally in large roosts. Woodpeckers often will excavate sleeping cavities in the fall rather than sleep in the older breeding cavity. Ruffed grouse, which usually prefer dense conifer cover in the warmer seasons, will often burrow into snow in the winter to avoid predators such as the northern goshawk.

## What do you do about a woodpecker knocking on your house?

Although a relatively infrequent problem nationwide, woodpecker damage to homes and outbuildings can be significant in our region. Woodpeckers cannot only be annoying by hammering or "drumming" on houses but can also cause property damage by drilling holes in wood siding and eaves.



Dave Fattaleh

Pileated woodpecker

Woodpeckers hammer to attract mates, to establish and defend territories, to excavate nesting sites and to search for insects. Wooden shingles, cedar or redwood siding, metal or plastic guttering, television antennas and light posts are selected as drumming sites because these materials produce loud sounds. Wooden siding is also attractive to woodpeckers as hollow spaces behind the siding can indicate that insects are present in the wood or that the wood is soft enough for nest excavation.

So, if woodpeckers have damaged a home, what is a homeowner to do? Short of shooting the birds, which are protected by strict state and federal laws, there are several techniques available. Of course if the structure is infested with insects this should be remedied as it is an attractant to woodpeckers. After eliminating possible insects, promptly fill all holes with patching compound. Then, depending on the building, metal flashing, tin can tops, or quarter-inch hardware cloth can be temporarily placed over the old holes to prevent further damage.

To keep the birds from the general area, three-quarter-inch garden netting can also be anchored three inches from the wall of the structure. Another technique proven effective is the use of aluminum pie pans, strips of Mylar tape (1 inch wide), or Mylar balloons hung from eaves above the affected area. Plastic owl decoys and hawk silhouettes are much less reliable. Most ornithologists warn against the use of odor repellants, sticky substances, or loud alarms. Most birds have no appreciable sense of smell, sticky traps are messy and kill other wildlife, and alarms do not work consistently and may disturb neighbors. And lastly, keep a sense of perspective! Your home is not being singled out for woodpecker vandalism, they are simply responding to the overwhelming biological urge to find a mate, set up a territory, and raise their young.

## If a young bird falls out of a nest what should you do?

Many parents have told their children to never touch young birds because the parent bird would smell them and abandon the young bird. Not so! Despite the good intentions of protecting the bird from the inquisitive nature of children, the majority of birds have a relatively poor sense of smell. For instance, the great horned owl is known for its fondness of eating skunks! Birds generally are visual and tactile animals, gaining knowledge of their surroundings through sight and touch. Consequently, if a baby bird is picked up and placed back in the nest after falling out, it will almost always be accepted by the parents. However, before



Young robin

Mark Shock

placing a young bird back in a nest, look to see if it has tail and wing feathers. If so, it's best to let it remain where found or move it a short distance to a safer spot as the parent birds are probably still feeding it. Often young birds will leave the nest before we think they should, but this is the natural process.

Finally, do not spend too much time near a nest or young birds because it will cause them undue stress and bring attention to their whereabouts.

## What are the best bird books and tapes for a beginning birder?

The best resource to learn about the birds in your area is other local people who are experienced bird-watchers. There is no substitute for joining a friend or small group for a morning of bird watching. There are several recommended books and audio guides that can help you prepare for such a trip.

By far the most popular guide is the *Peterson Field Guide to the Eastern Birds*. The first widely popular bird guide, it introduces species in drawings with indicator arrows pointing to distinctive characteristics. This and the accompanying audio tapes or CDs of bird song are a good starting point for beginning birdwatchers.

For a slightly larger guide that includes all North American species and is preferred by many serious birders, *The National Geographic Field Guide to the Birds of North America* is a good choice. This text also contains drawings but has the added bonus of range maps for each species on the same page as the species description. Another field guide to the birds is the *Stokes Field Guide to Birds, Eastern Region*. Although many birders would warn against using photographs to learn the birds, this book is very easy to use, has wonderful photographs

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(some enhanced to show important features), and has a CD collection of bird songs and calls available with its own text explaining the sounds. Other excellent books include: *National Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Birds, Eastern Region*; *The Sibley Guide to Birds*; *Golden Field Guide-Birds of North America*; and, for beginning birders, *Peter-son First Guides--Birds*.

## What are the best ways to attract birds to my feeder?

Do not worry if birds do not flock to your feeders at first, they often need time to get comfortable with new feeders. Placement of feeders can aid in attracting birds sooner though. Sometimes it may take more time for birds to find window feeders than hanging or pole-mounted feeders. Feeders should be located near cover where birds roost, but not close enough to permit ambush by predators. It also helps to place the feeder out of areas of intense weather.

Time of year can also be a factor when feeding birds. While there is no best time to start feeding birds, you may attract more birds in the late fall when songbirds are establishing their winter feeding territories. You may notice a decrease in visits as spring arrives, birds start to breed and more natural food is available. You can continue to feed at this time, but be careful to keep the feeding stations clean during these warm months. Wash with soap, dip a solution of nine parts water to one part bleach and rinse thoroughly.

## How do you prevent birds from hitting windows?

Unfortunately, birds occasionally strike the windows of our homes, often injuring or even killing themselves. Generally, the reason for this is the reflection of woods or sky in the window. Birds are unable to discern between the window and their habitat. To help prevent this, decals or stickers can be placed on the windows to break up the reflection. Window films also reduce reflections and placing nets in front of the windows will protect the birds from injury.

It is also important to carefully place bird feeders. They should be



*Nuthatch at feeder*

placed 25 or more feet away from windows to reduce window strikes.

If you find a bird that has hit a window, carefully pick it up and put it in a box or large paper bag. Put it in a warm, dark, quiet corner of your house for a couple of hours. If the bird recovers, take the box or bag outside and let it go. In the case of raptors, if the bird comes to, but seems injured, call a wildlife rehabilitation center. (See numbers at right.)

## What do I do with an injured bird?

Often birds are hurt by bad weather, predators, accidents and sometimes, by humans. When observing an injured bird, ask yourself if the bird is actually hurt. Some bird species, such as the killdeer and worm-eating warbler, will perform a “broken-wing display” to lead predators away from their nest. Other species, such as some sparrows, will “crawl” along the ground in thick brush to avoid predators.

It is best to approach an injured bird slowly and quietly. Handle the animal as little as possible and place it in a warm environment such as a closed cardboard box with an old towel.

Be aware that larger birds, such as waterfowl and hawks, are quite powerful and can cause severe injury if not handled properly. You should not try to feed injured birds until the nature of the injury is determined. Often birds can have internal injuries and do not show many outward signs of stress. Professional wildlife rehabilitators should be contacted.

In West Virginia there are three bird rehabilitation centers, Three Rivers Avian Center in

southern WV (1-800-721-5252), the WV Raptor Rehabilitation Center near Morgantown (1-800-540-6390) and the Oglebay Good Zoo (304-243-4100) in the Northern Panhandle.

*Russ McClain is a former WV DNR wildlife biologist. Portions of this story were adapted from: Leahy, C. 1982. The Birdwatcher's Companion. Gramercy Books, New York, NY.*