



WESTERN CUYAHOGA AUDUBON SOCIETY

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Winter Robins

By Nancy Howell, Western Cuyahoga Audubon Society Board Member

I love watching American Robins in the winter.

A flock of about 30 American Robins descended on snowy Winterberry Holly bushes not too long ago. The bushes, growing near a busy intersection, were covered with bright red fruit. I had noticed the bushes this past fall when the leaves fell off and wondered what would consume the fruits and when. For months the fruits remained untouched ... until a recent snowfall. I was able to watch the birds as I sat in the car waiting for the light to change at the intersection. Down they came from nearby trees to either land on the bushes themselves or in the snow among the bushes, grabbing and swallowing each fruit whole. As cars came by some would fly a short distance, then return. I was so engrossed watching the birds that when traffic started moving the driver behind me blew its horn ... oops ... but wait ... I wanted to get out of the car, knock on car windows, and have people look at the beautiful sight.

Robins in winter? Yes. We all have heard that “robins are a sign of spring”, but more and more, or so it seems, American Robins are here throughout the winter. Are these the same robins we see in our neighborhoods in the spring and summer? Are they migrants from further north that find Ohio a place to winter? A little of both? Were American Robins less common when I was young? I have been birding for a long time and, as a youngster, I don’t recall them being around in the winter. Maybe I was just not as observant as a kid? Christmas Bird Count data for the Lakewood Circle shows an increase in American Robins over the past 30 years. Are the fruit producing plants that robins use in the winter more abundant? Are we being more observant? Are there more variables that should be considered? So many questions that need to be answered.

American Robins in the winter seem so much more deeply hued - a charcoal colored head which makes the white markings on the throat and around the eye more noticeable, the gray of the back and wings, and the rusty red breast and belly. The feathers are crisp and fresh. As the wings fold, I admire how the feathers align and overlap. Perfect. I note the subtleties, such as the white tips on the red breast feathers giving them a frosty appearance, the yellow beak picking berry after berry, the large, bright eyes in search of another fruit to grab.

Here I am in a city watching a common bird feeding on a not very commonly planted, native plant. Here I am watching birds that have been searching for some sustenance to tide them through the snowy weather and they have found it. Here I am watching them move, flutter, hover, grab and swallow. Here I am looking at robins in the winter so full of fruit, and feathers so fluffed, that the birds look like a ball with a head and legs. I have watched American Robins in other places in my neighborhood. Sometimes the robins are joined by Cedar Waxwings or Eastern Bluebirds feasting in the same tree. After feeding on fruit, I have watched American Robins drink the drips of water from icicles. The birds have embraced their urban setting.

A common, urban bird, finding food, water and shelter, and thriving in our winter weather. Any of us can find moments like this as we tune in to nature. Begin with something simple, like robins in winter ... or any time of the year.