

The Wild Side

by Dave Gibson

BUILD IT AND THEY WILL COME

In "Field of Dreams", Kevin Costner's character cleared acres of corn and built a baseball diamond that enticed the scandalous 1919 "Black Sox." Eight players were accused of throwing the World Series against the Cincinnati Reds in that year, and were later banned from baseball. "Build it and they will come", the Iowa farmer was told.

The same holds true in birding. You could walk through the woods, in six foot snow drifts, for a week and only catch glimpses of a fleeing pine grosbeak or raven. Fortunately, the solution is simple. Instead of going to the birds, why not bring the birds to you!



A platform feeder, filled with black oil sunflower seeds, is a good place to start. In wintertime, it will attract dark-eyed juncos, pine siskins, Cassin's finches, white-breasted nuthatches, red-breasted nuthatches, pygmy nuthatches, Steller jays, American goldfinches, hairy and downy woodpeckers, black-capped and mountain chickadees. It may also bring some unwanted visitors such as squirrels or raccoons. I accepted long ago that my offerings were for all of my wild guests. Trying to outsmart a squirrel is pure folly and I have no desire to turn into Elmer Fudd. I do however limit the seed that I put out each day to only as

much as the animals can consume during daylight hours to discourage raccoon forays. While the bears are hibernating, I present a suet cake. Packed with high-energy fat, the chickadees, nuthatches, and woodpeckers love it, as do the Clark's nutcrackers and magpies. One time, nine pygmy nuthatches crammed onto the 6" x 6" area of my suet cage, furiously pecking away at the frozen animal tallow.

You can add tube feeders with various mixes, bird houses and water features. All of these things will bring the birds to you. Periodic cleaning of feeders and birdbaths (when it's above freezing), with 10 parts water and 1 part bleach followed by thorough rinsing will keep your feeding station safe and disease-free for all your newfound avian acquaintances. Placing feeders close to your house not only gives you a better view, but also almost completely eliminates window collisions. I've attached pieces of gnarled wood to the deck railing next to my feeder for more natural-looking photos. When the snow is swirling and it is zero degrees outside, I can get frame-filling bird pictures from 10 feet away by using my open window as a blind.

After a short period of time, the birds will become accustomed to your presence. Mountain chickadees are particularly bold. Once, at Reifel Refuge near Vancouver, Canada, I saw an elderly gentleman, whom had visited many times before, hold his cupped hand out as a chickadee alighted on his fingertips to feed!

The birds have survived for eons without our assistance and don't really need us. Offering extra sustenance to our feathered friends during the harshest weather months is a bonus to them and a privilege for us. Observing the birds at close proximity flitting from branch to branch, being serenaded by their songs, and witnessing the interesting interactions and behaviors that they exhibit, will make your efforts well worthwhile. While "Shoeless" Joe Jackson or Oscar "Happy" Felsch of the infamous "Black Sox" may not materialize, woodpeckers, nuthatches, and chickadees most certainly will pay you a visit.

Dave Gibson is a photographer & writer focusing on the natural world around us. His imagery can be found on his web site at www.davegibsonimages.com