

Helping Winter Wildlife

We're not the only creatures on the planet that face challenges with the cold weather. Many species of wildlife have their fair share of problems with the chilly months as well. Some animals have amazing ways of coping with weather changes. Other species, such as birds and butterflies, migrate to new locations where it is warmer. Some critters even have special adaptations and features that enable them to survive the lower temperatures. But there are still many ways that we humans can help the critters survive the colder weather.

Some species of birds, such as the chickadee, have the amazing ability to lower their body temperature 12 to 15 degrees below normal daytime temperature to conserve energy during freezing nights. Even so, when outside temperatures drop, scientists have found that many birds benefit from supplemental foods. Survival rate of these feathered creatures as much as doubles when they have access to sunflower seeds and other foods supplied by back yard bird feeders. Other birds that survive only on wild foods do not fare as well in the winter months.

You can assist our feathered friends simply by placing a bird feeder with ample supplies of sunflower seeds and other nutritious bird food in your yard. It can't hurt to keep some trees and perhaps even a bird house nearby so that they will have some shelter as well.

Frogs also have an amazing way of surviving the colder months. Many survive by burrowing into mud and other debris at the bottom of ponds. Other species such as bullfrogs and green frogs sit in the warmer mud, but don't actually bury themselves. When looking at these winter frogs underwater, they may appear dead because they look mushy and the color of the rotting leaves around them. Actually they have the ability to breathe through their skin, very slowly. Terrestrial frogs hibernate between cracks in logs, rocks or bury themselves under the leaves on the ground.

One way to aide these winter amphibians, is to make sure that if you have a backyard pond or water source, leave some leaf debris at the bottom. If a freeze should occur, take care to make sure the water doesn't completely freeze over. Frogs will die from lack of oxygen if they don't have access to air. Aerators, waterfalls or other types of devices that move water can keep the ponds from freezing over in the colder months. Terrestrial frogs need leaves, fallen logs, limbs and piles of rocks to survive. These steps are fairly easy to achieve to help these chilly critters through the winter.

Insects aren't usually the most popular creatures around. But where would we be without them? Many beneficial bugs keep our yards healthy from the not so beneficial ones. For example, ladybug larvae and adults eat aphids, mealybugs, and mites. During the winter, some insects continue to stay active. Others go into a dormant state called "diapause." Ladybugs spend winter in this state; first they fatten up for winter by eating plenty of aphids and pollen, then they hide in buildings or under logs, rocks or leaves. Those that go dormant can survive a broad range of temperatures because of a unique liquid within their bodies. One of the most common substances is ethylene glycol, the same compound found in antifreeze used in vehicles.

Other insects are called “freeze-tolerant” and they survive because the fluids surrounding living cells in their bodies actually freeze, protecting them from cold temperatures by forcing water out of living cells, which lowers their freezing point. Insects such as monarch butterflies may migrate to warmer climates in the winter months

Once again, providing habitat such as leaf litter, fallen branches, twigs and evergreen plants can help these six legged creatures.

There are many simple steps you can take to help wildlife make it through the winter.

- Provide a source of water for wildlife; they may have a difficult time finding drinking water during winter months.
- Buy nontoxic antifreeze made with *propylene* glycol instead of *ethylene* glycol, which can kill animals even in small doses. Safe brands include Sierra and Prestone Lowtox. Animals are attracted to antifreeze for its sweetness, so clean up spills quickly, and buy brands with the bittering agent denatonium benzoate.
- While it’s best to provide natural sources of food and shelter for birds by planting flowers, shrubs, and trees that produce seeds and berries, birds may need an extra boost during the winter, when they are burning extra calories to keep warm. Use a blend of seed that includes oiled sunflower seeds, which are high in calories.
- It is very tempting to tidy up the garden after the fall months, but this is a crucial time for wildlife. If you disturb creatures at this time, they can waste energy trying to find a new habitat - the last thing they need with winter on the way. Give them plenty of places to take shelter.