

# Appreciating Our Feathered Friends

By Austin White

Peek outside your window any day in North Central Pennsylvania and you are certain to see a variety of beautiful birds. For instance, having a family of cardinals as your neighbors is one of the privileges of living in our rural area. Birds are in such abundance here that it is easy to lose perspective of how truly blessed we are to have so many of them living amongst us.

Travel in North America with your birding hat on (metaphorically...unless you have an actual birding hat, in which case go ahead and wear it) and your mileage may vary. Certainly, there is quite a contrast with urban areas in terms of variety. For instance, our family had friends from central Philadelphia visit our home in Loyalsock a few years ago, and the window overlooking our small yard was excellent entertainment. Not just the birds -- the chipmunks were also a huge hit. So, yeah, appreciate those little critters as well. Well, most of them. There is a family of chipmunks trying to infiltrate my house for this coming winter. They deserve no appreciation.

Travel farther from home and our feathered friends can serve as a bridge to the unfamiliar. For instance, go for a hike in Yosemite National Park. The flora and terrain are unlike anything we have in Pennsylvania (e.g. the monstrous vertical rock formation El Capitan!). But you should hear a familiar sound as you climb in elevation -- a chickadee song. The aptly named Mountain Chickadee, which looks like a Black Capped Chickadee with a white eyebrow, will be singing a song that is similar to the Black-capped Chickadees of our area. Close your eyes and you can feel like you are in your back yard for a moment.

The familiar within the unfamiliar is a bit of a theme for North American birds. The chickadee is a great example, with at least seven varieties scattered throughout the continent -- Black-Capped Chickadee, Boreal Chickadee, Carolina Chickadee, Chestnut-backed Chickadee, Gray-headed Chickadee, Mexican Chickadee, and Mountain Chickadee. If you were in Alaska and saw a Boreal Chickadee, wouldn't you feel a little closer to home? They are adorably cute. Look one up if you are not familiar.

Birds can also make us feel like we have entered an alternate universe. Travel to coastal areas along the east, or Florida in particular, and see a large White Ibis sipping water in random puddles. Even in parking lots! Locals seem to pay zero attention to them. I, however, am enthralled -- they look like living dinosaurs. What beautiful birds.

If you do travel don't forget to fill your feeder before you leave. Your backyard birds will appreciate YOU. And please throw some extra seed on the ground for the chipmunks. Better your house than mine.

Safe travels!

Photos by Lauren Shaffer

