Winter visitors to Illinois sometimes include some species typical of more northerly climates.

Snow Birds of the Feathered Variety

Story By Kathy Andrews

(Photo by Adele Hodde.)

The smallest owl to inhabit Illinois (an inch smaller than the screech owl), the saw-whet owl (*Aegolius acadicus*) winters in Illinois every year but because of their cryptic coloration, infrequent vocalizations and habit of roosting in dense cedar trees, they are seldom seen. Your best chance of sighting this visitor is to walk through an area containing numerous cedars, looking for a 7-inch owl nestled against the tree trunk. A specialist feeding primarily on deer mice, a clue to their existence may be the pellets of indigestible hair and bone found under their perch.

Winter. There are those who anxiously await its arrival as the time of year when they can hop on the snowmobile, strap on the skis or pull out the ice-fishing gear. Others view the onset of chilly temperatures as a sign that it's time to point the RV south and head off for a few months in a warmer setting.

Like people, there are members of the bird community that savor wintry weather, and others that wing thousands of miles south well in advance of plummeting temperatures. While the human preference for staying or leaving is a matter of personal comfort and interests in outdoor activities, the winter residences our feathered friends select is driven solely on the availability of food.

According to Mike Ward, Illinois Natural History Survey avian ecologist and assistant professor in the Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Sciences at the University of Illinois, the year-to-year variation in our winter residents depends on food supplies in northern areas.

"Those years that seed production is poor in the northern boreal forests we'll see a southern range expansion of crossbills, common redpolls, pine siskins and other seed-eating birds,"

(Photo by Mary Kay Ruby.)

Similar in size to its cousin the American goldfinch, the pine siskin (*Spinus pinus*) has a heavily streaked body with yellow at the base of the tail and in the wings. Pine siskins utilize the same thistle feeders as goldfinches, and fluctuations in numbers aren't a reflection on your feeder but the seed populations in Canada.

(Photo by George Oetzel, editor, *On the Wing*, Boulder County Audubon Society http://www.boulderaudubon.org.)

Crossbills are similar in size to the slate-colored junco, a common winter resident which frequents ground feeders. Crossbills are so named because their mandibles curve toward each other and cross at the tip.

The more common of the two crossbills, and occasionally sighted in Illinois is *Loxia curvirostra*, or the red crossbill. Males have a dull-red head and body and blackish wings and tail, while females and juveniles are dull gray with hints of yellow. A highly nomadic bird, the red crossbill specializes in feeding on conifer seeds and, when present, will be seen in pine trees, not feeders.

Ward explained. "Small mammal populations are cyclic, and when mice and vole numbers are at their lowest up north we see influxes of predators, such as the snowy owl."

While these rarities excite birders and those closely monitoring their backyard bird feeders, their presence doesn't bode well for the birds.

"If birds have to come this far south to find food it probably means a lot of them aren't surviving in their natural range because of limited food supplies," Ward said.

On the other hand, in mild winters a lot of birds that breed stay, which Ward said is to their benefit.

"If a bird doesn't have to migrate, there is less chance that it will get lost or eaten, and, since they'll be the first back in the spring, they get the choice breeding habitat," said Ward.

What birds will the winter winds bring to Illinois this year? While some general trends may be possible based on small-mammal population cycles, you never really know what is present until you venture outdoors.

(Photo by David W. Brewer.)

The snowy owl (*Nyctea scandiaca*) differs from the owls most typically found in Illinois in two ways: Snowy owls are diurnal, or active during the day, and they perch on the ground in open fields. Comparable in size to the great horned owl, adult snowy owls are mostly pure white. Darker, immature birds, more commonly seen wintering farther south than older birds, are less adept at finding limited foods. Numbers sighted in Illinois annually vary from a couple to nearly 30, and ideal viewing spots are along Lake Michigan, including Northerly Island.

The common redpoll (*Acanthis flammea*) also feeds like the goldfinch. A black chin, red cap and white wing bars make for easy identification of the occasional redpoll frequenting your feeder. A rarer Illinois winter visitor than the pine siskin, relatively few redpolls show up at feeders each year.

(Photo by Mary Kay Ruby.)