

Winged Therapy

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"There is symbolic as well as actual beauty in the migration of the birds . . . There is something infinitely healing in the repeated refrains of nature — the assurance that dawn comes after night, and spring after the winter." — Rachel Carson

The old woman's turquoise eyes sparkled. She leaned forward to get a better look. Deep lines broke across her face as she narrowed her focus beyond the window. Slowly, an awkward grin formed on her face. If, as they say, the eyes are windows to the soul, then at that moment Agnes's soul was being nourished.

Outside the window at her nursing center, sparrows pecked at seed spilled beneath a cluster of rustic feeders. House Sparrows, often maligned as "trash birds," were profoundly touching the life of a human being — someone desperately needing to be touched.

To some individuals, watching birds at a feeder is a casual hobby. To others, filling and maintaining feeders is one of many household chores. Some of us are motivated by the hope of attracting a rarity, whereas others find it a fascinating study of bird behavior. But to Agnes, a resident at Schowalter Villa Nursing Center in Hesston, Kansas, watching feeder birds is a vital part of her everyday life. Agnes is just one of countless nursing home





MASI OWSKI PHOTO

site. If they can agree on a site, the nest becomes the center of activity until the young fledge. Downies rarely choose nesting boxes, as the act of excavating the cavity is an important part of the woodpecker's breeding behavior. Excavation is mostly accomplished by the male, who digs a gourd-shaped cavity 8 to 12 inches deep. Each year a new hole is excavated with the entrance often camouflaged by the surrounding fungus, lichens, or moss.

The pair will use the nest as a roost the following winter.

Both sexes participate in incubating the white speckle-free eggs (from three to six) for a period of 14 to 15 days. Woodpecker nestlings remain at home longer than most birds, and can fly immediately upon leaving the nest. When the young fledge, the parents often take the "fast-food" route and introduce them to a nearby feeder. This has been our experience, and it is diffi-

Downies will surprise you with their dietary diversity. From scavenged beetle larvae and seeds to feeder-supplied suet and peanut butter, Downy Woodpeckers are resourceful food gatherers.

cult keeping the feeders filled with all those mouths to feed! About three weeks after fledging, the young will be encouraged to move on to find their own territory.

While two broods might be produced in the South, most Downy Woodpecker pairs raise one brood. Once their young are fledged, the mated pair seems to prefer to roam and seek out natural food sources, as opposed to the easy calories of feeder food. The pair may remain in the same territory, but they will not feed together. About three-fourths of their natural diet consists of insect larvae and eggs, beetles, wood-boring ants, and caterpillars. Downies round out their diet with seeds, berries and fruit, some sap, and the cambium layer of bark. During the summer months, nature supplies their favorite foods in abundance, and we see less of them at our feeders.

But as the days get shorter and there's a nip in the air, the companionable downies will be regulars at our feeders once again. It just wouldn't be fall without them. **M**

Tempting Downies to Your Yard

Try these "down-y-home" recipes; they're sure to please.

Make-It-Yourself Suet

1 cup lard
1 cup chunky peanut butter
1 1/2 cups cornmeal
1 1/2 cups oatmeal
1 cup flour
1/3 cup sugar
1 cup sunflower chips or cracked corn

Melt peanut butter and lard over low heat. Remove from heat, and mix in all other ingredients. Pour into shallow pan, cool, and cut into squares.

Peanut Butter Stick

6 metal bottle caps
1 small nail
6 carpet tacks
17-inch branch
1 screw eye
Peanut butter and unsalted chopped nuts
1 metal coat hanger

Make holes in the center of the bottle caps with a small nail. Using the carpet tacks, attach the caps to a cut branch. Hammer a screw eye partway into the top of the stick, then screw it tight. Fill the bottle caps with a mix of peanut butter and nuts. Hook the feeder on a coat hanger, and hang it on a tree's limb.



residents who enjoy watching birds, and for whom birds are more than a diversion — they provide therapy with significant benefits.

“All the people here are birdwatchers,” notes Sandra Patterson, Schowalter Villa’s activities coordinator. “We have residents who race to see who can spot the first robin, finch, or whatever bird they decide upon.”

Many families have placed birdhouses and feeders outside their relatives’ rooms at Schowalter Villa. Patterson describes some of the feeders as being very original. For example, the husband of one resident built a feeder modeled after a famous fast food restaurant — complete with golden arches. “They call it the Bird McFeeder Fly-Thru,” Patterson said, “and brag that more than 1000 have been served. The humor and creativity make it fun.”

At the Valley Vista Center in nearby Junction City, residents go on local field trips to birdwatch, including visits to a Great Blue Heron nesting colony. The large, gangly herons are favorites of the residents. Michael Anderson, activities director at Valley Vista, said that residents “stretch out on the grass

and soak up the sun” while watching the herons. “It feels great and the residents really enjoy it.”

Members of Valley Vista’s bird-watching club take turns replenishing seed, while others in the center’s wood shop club build and repair feeders. Everyday, residents gather in Anderson’s office to drink coffee and identify birds that come to the feeders. “So far we have seen twenty-three species visiting our place,” Anderson proudly noted.

Vanessa Condrey, activities director at Wichita’s Lorraine Center, said bird programs and activities play a major therapeutic role at her urban facility. When residents are feeding birds, they get much-needed exercise and pleasure from being outdoors. “It gives the residents, especially those affected by Alzheimer’s and dementia, great pleasure to care for something,” she said. Tearing bread, donated by a local bakery, into smaller pieces “is good


The pleasures of birdwatching bring generations together, as with the author and his grandmother.

therapy for stiff arms and fingers.”

As another part of the center’s therapy program, residents are encouraged to sit outside and whistle and sing with the birds. “It’s a great involvement activity for everyone,” notes Condrey.

Bird feeders have become commonplace at nursing homes and other assisted living communities throughout the state. For nearly twenty years, the Kansas Department of Wildlife and Parks has distributed bird feeders and seed to nursing homes. The program is designed to enhance the quality of life for residents of assisted living communities and to encourage visiting family and friends, and facility staff, to enjoy and appreciate Kansas birds.

An evaluation of this program found it to be an overwhelming success. In a survey of health care administrators at participating institutions, 100 percent agreed with the statements that “residents enjoyed watching the birds,” and “the program had a positive affect on the residents’ morale.” Two-thirds “strongly agreed” with these statements. When asked if watching birds had a “positive therapeutic effect” on the residents, 99 percent of the administrators agreed, again with two-thirds “strongly agreeing” that therapeutic effects resulted from bird feeding. All of the administrators believed their staffs had benefited from the bird-feeding program. At the end of the questionnaire, there was an opportunity for open-ended comments; all responses were either requests for more bird-related materials or testimonials to the positive impact of the program.

If you do not already have a friend or family member in an assisted living environment, you probably will. For residents of these facilities, birds are not merely entertainment — they are feathered blessings that offer many benefits. Emily Dickinson wrote, “Hope is the thing with feathers, that perches in the soul.” For Agnes and countless others of us, sometimes it perches right outside our windows. 



Therapeutic Benefits of Feeding Birds

According to health care professionals, bird-feeding programs benefit residents of assisted living environments in numerous ways. It is important to note that these same benefits apply to those of us who feed birds in our own backyards.

Sensory stimulation: Birds provide visual and auditory stimulation. Watching birds may even improve eye tracking and the visual field of some individuals. For example, stroke victims may have lost the use of one side of their body. Consequently, they have a tendency to neglect the visual field associated with the affected eye. Feeders strategically placed outside the windows of these patients may direct attention to the affected portion of their visual field.

Temporal orientation: Because some birds are seasonal in their use of feeders and visits may vary by time of day, residents may use these patterns to orient themselves temporally. Scheduled bird watching and feeding times also help provide temporal orientation.

Behavior modification: Learning to be quiet or still, to prevent birds from flying away, may help patients who have trouble controlling certain

behaviors, and act to reinforce appropriate behavior in these individuals.

Increased self-esteem: By sensing that they are needed to care for the birds, residents build self-esteem. Many individuals have spent their entire lives caring for other family members and pets. Without anyone or anything to care for, they may feel a void in their lives. One resident noted that feeding the birds made her feel “worthwhile.”

Enhanced motor skills: Cleaning and filling bird feeders helps develop and maintain motor skills. Making and maintaining feeders also are excellent motor skill development activities.

Positive family communications: Visitors sometimes have difficulty conversing with residents, resulting in uncomfortable periods of silence. Bird feeders provide an alternative focus that can lead to more positive communication and more enjoyable visits.

Decreased loneliness and isolation: Birds give residents of nursing homes and similar facilities an important sense of connection with the outside world.

