

# Fall's Colorful Swan Song



Autumn's crisp days and colorful foliage provide the perfect setting for an invigorating walk through the woods. As the leaves change from green to a glorious palette of bright gold, orange and red, several colorful bird species take on more subdued hues.

"Fall is the most challenging time of year for bird watchers, because the changing plumage makes it more difficult to identify the migrating birds" said Park Authority naturalist Tony Bulmer. "In spring, the male birds are at their brightest because they're trying to attract a mate. Brighter colors ensure the species will continue."

Once mating season is over, Bulmer says the birds gradually molt, or lose their bright feathers as the seasons change, making it difficult to distinguish the males from the less-colorful females. By fall, their toned-down appearance helps assure the species will survive through fall and winter.

"The subdued color helps camouflage the birds because there aren't as many leaves to provide cover from predators," Bulmer said. "All warblers will develop a fall wardrobe and so will goldfinches and robins."

Bird behavior also changes with the seasons. Fall's shorter days trigger migration to warmer climates for most. Other birds that stay through winter will flock together.

"It's not uncommon for bird boxes to have as many as eight bluebirds communing together in winter because they're trying to stay warm on cooler nights," Bulmer said. "The rest of the year, it's just mom, dad and the babies, and everyone else gets kicked out."

Feeding habits also change with the seasons. Fewer insects and wild plant food sources are available in fall and spring, which is why birds are more likely to be attracted to your backyard bird feeder.

"Hummingbird feeders in the fall are really important when the birds are migrating," Bulmer said. "Adult males leave first, and the rest of the family follows later in a flock, so when they stop at the feeder, they're really fun to watch."

Traditional backyard feeders or suet will attract other birds in the fall giving you the best chance of catching a glimpse of their lifestyles as the seasons come and go.

"Most birds migrate at night," Bulmer said. "In the daytime, they sleep and pig out to prepare for night travels in flocks."

Keep the feeder full throughout winter, and you'll help year-round residents like cardinals and robins survive and thrive until the cycle starts anew in the spring.

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Fall is a great time to learn about birds and other resident wildlife in parks. To find a program near you, turn to the Nature section.

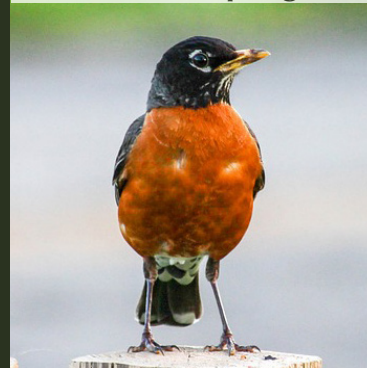
Goldfinch in Spring



Goldfinch in Fall



Robin in Spring



Robin in Fall

