

Scrub Hub: Here's how you can help wildlife over the winter



Karl Schneider

Indianapolis Star

The winter chill has descended on Indiana and most Hoosiers already have experienced the first snows of the season.

With more rough weather on the horizon, and a season of sharing and caring upon us, we're using this edition of Scrub Hub to offer up answers to one common question:

What can you do to help wildlife during the winter months?

We spoke with wildlife experts at Indiana Audubon and the Indiana Wildlife Federation for suggestions on what can be done to help those critters who overwinter here in the state.

Short answer: Feed the birds

When the snows come early, a great way to help out the late-migrating birds, as well as those that stick around all winter, is to set out bird food.

Birds aren't reliant on feeders, but the supplemental food can help, said Indiana Audubon's Sam Warren.

"When talking about feeding, we suggest providing a variety of seed and food and also, if people are able, to put out heated water or water nearby," Warren said.



Winter finches are one species that like to stay in Indiana as others fly off to warmer climates. Warren said filling long feeder tubes with Nyjer seed can provide the finches with a nice spot to snack.

Woodpeckers, chickadees, tufted titmice and nuthatches will enjoy a suet feeder. Variety of seeds, Warren said, is ideal with sunflower seeds and millet being good Indiana winter choices.

For a more natural approach, Indiana Wildlife Federation's new executive director, Dan Borrit, suggested leaving flower heads on the native plants in your yard. It won't be enough to sustain the birds, but in winter months when there isn't an abundance of readily available food, anything helps.

The Indiana Native Plant Society has a comprehensive website, Warren said, that provides examples of plants that are bird friendly for those of you already thinking ahead to spring.

“Any natives are great,” Warren said. “We suggest having a variety in the yard. Even if you don’t have acres to plant a prairie, placing them just around bird feeder works. These are great opportunities to provide a bit of habitat for these birds.”

Long answer: The yard is an insect sanctuary

The first thing Boritt thought of when IndyStar asked about helping winter wildlife: Leave the leaves.

“Not everyone can do that with HOA rules, but one of the best things we can do for wildlife is to leave leaf litter on the ground,” Boritt said.

This idea is primarily geared toward insects, he said, which use the leaves to lay eggs and ride out the winter. The leaves provide a layer of insulation, protection so predators don’t find the insects, and create habitat for some cool critters like Luna moths.

“Everything eats insects,” Boritt said. “Keeping them safe helps to ensure healthy food supplies for birds and small mammals. All sorts of creatures out there need these things to survive when spring comes back.”

Leaf litter doesn’t necessarily need to take up the entire yard either, Boritt said. Just rake some into a portion of the yard and leave them over winter.

In the same vein, creating snag piles from twigs and small branches dropped from trees can also offer some protection for wildlife. Anything that provides a respite or wind break can be really helpful to survival, Boritt said.

Just think about what a humans need to survive: food, water and shelter, and you’re on your way to understanding how to help wildlife.

One more involved way to help out some of the native creatures here in Indiana is by building and properly mounting bat boxes.

The National Wildlife Foundation provides free, step-by-step instructions on building and placing a bat house at its website: <https://www.nwf.org/garden-for-wildlife/cover/build-a-bat-house>

Bats are an invaluable resource, not only keeping insect populations under control but also providing beneficial pollination to the agriculture industry.



Boritt said he's seen bat boxes in urban areas of the state with dozens of bats utilizing the space. Sometimes, bat boxes will go up and go unused, but Boritt said the simple fact of acting to protect wildlife is great.

“Even if things aren't working, but you're doing it and talking about it with kids, you're raising awareness and paying attention,” Boritt said. “There's great value in interest. If you're willing to take the leap and build or buy a bat box you care and are trying to do something.”

For the more daring Hoosiers, bats and some snakes will sometimes find their way into homes to camp out winter inside. Boritt would encourage people, if they can stomach it, to leave them be. The bats and snakes coming inside will be dormant and if removed outside will likely die, he said.

So whether spreading bird seeds, building bat boxes or sharing a couple nooks and crannies of your home with a dormant bat or two, there are plenty of opportunities for Hoosiers to lend a helping hand this winter.

Karl Schneider is an IndyStar environment reporter. You can reach him at karl.schneider@indystar.com. Follow him on Twitter [@karlstartwithk](https://twitter.com/karlstartwithk)

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