2007 WINTER BIRD SURVEY

A New Year's Challenge for Oklahomans:

By Jenny Thom and Mark Howery • Photos by Bill Horn

Attention Oklahoma hunters, anglers and wildlife-watchers: Are one of the almost one million state residents who feed, watch or photograph wild birds? If so, you may want to take on the Winter Bird Survey Challenge. Twenty-five percent of last year's 422 bird-counters were first-time participants. Biologists challenge 25 percent more Oklahoma households to be first-time counters in 2007!

Kick off the year with a New Year's goal you achieve right away. Choose two days between the Jan. 11 and Jan. 14 survey period to jot down the birds visiting your winter feeders. It's easier than ever before. You can get your Winter Bird Survey form and submit viewing results at wildlifedepartment.com.

Need help identifying what you're seeing? Check out the Wildlife Department's brand new Bird ID tool at wildlifedepartment.com. View pictures, descriptions and ID tips for every bird listed on the Winter Bird Survey.

Who's Watching the Birds?

Lots of people are watching Oklahoma's wild birds. If you're reading this, chances are you're one of them. One out of every three Oklahomans watch, photograph or feed wild birds around their homes.* Of those, 88 percent specifically watch birds.* (Does that mean the remaining 12 percent feed but don't watch? What a shame!)

Fifty-six percent of those watching backyard birds also hunt and fish. In their bird watching pursuits, this group annually spends $40 million on birdseed and another $29 million on birdhouses, feeders and birdbaths.* By the year's end, each participant will have spent $65 on average in observation of the state's cardinals, mourning doves, dark-eyed juncos, mocking birds, sparrows and other species.

Why take on the Winter Bird Survey Challenge?

For 19 years, a portion of bird-watching, bird-feeding Oklahomans have turned their pastime into science by participating in the Winter Bird Survey. Because there are more people feeding birds across Oklahoma than there are biologists, this annual survey helps track the upward and downward population trends of the birds visiting winter feeders. This information gives biologists clues into potential conservation issues, from which they can take action, if needed.

The data also gives biologists a heads-up into emerging trends. One such trend is the expansion and population growth of Eurasian collared doves, Inca doves and white-winged doves. Appearances of these birds on 2002 survey reports further confirmed what state biologists were beginning to think: these species would start to arrive in more urban areas and in greater numbers across the state. Oklahomans continue to help track the birds' range expansions through the Winter Bird Survey.

How many birds can a bird watcher name?

Nearly 1 million Oklahomans enjoy viewing wild birds, but do they all know what they're seeing? Winter Bird Survey participants seem to. Sixty-five percent rated their identification ability as "excellent" and 30 percent rated it as "good." But Winter Bird surveyors make up less than 1 percent of the bird-watching community. Let's see how their identification skills stack up against the rest of the state.

Seventy-one percent of statewide bird-watchers can identify one to 20 birds by sight or sound. When that increases to 21 to 40 different birds, identification ability drops to 17 percent.*

There are 51 bird species on the Winter Bird Survey list!

State biologists don't expect you to be able to name all 51 birds without a little help. The Wildlife Department answers all your bird identification questions at wildlifedepartment.com, which also links to the Winter Bird Survey form.

Feeling a little better? Lots of people are already watching Oklahoma's winter birds. Learn what

2006 Top 10 Most Commonly Seen Birds As Recorded At 422 Feeder Locations

	Numbers Reported	Percent of Households
Goldfinch	6,674	76
Dark-eyed Junco	3,832	81
Starling	3,825	34
House Sparrow	3,604	63
Cardinal	2,763	91
Red-winged Blackbird	2,512	29
Mourning Dove	1,871	61
House Finch	1,721	58
Carolina Chickadee	1,671	80
Tufted Titmouse	1,005	59

* *Data as reported by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's "2001 National Survey of Fishing, Hunting and Wildlife-Associated Recreation.)*

Are You Up for the Winter Bird Survey Challenge?

It's easy to take part in the Winter Bird Survey, especially if you already feed wild birds. The 2007 survey period runs from January 11–January 14. Choose **any two days** during that time to watch and record the birds at your winter feeders.

Visit wildlifedepartment.com for help identifying the birds that you see. The Wildlife Department's new birding tool identifies 52 bird species that commonly appear at bird feeders in Oklahoma during the winter. The site includes every bird listed on the Winter Bird Survey and lets you submit your survey results online.

Boost your winter bird know-how as you search pictures, range maps and behavior notes. Descriptions include bird feeder style and type of feed recommended to attract each bird. Designed to assist new backyard bird watchers and Winter Bird Survey participants, even experienced birders will discover helpful tips to identify and attract winter birds.

Learn what you're seeing and report what you're viewing. Accept the Winter Bird Survey challenge, and turn your pastime into science.

For additional questions, or to receive a survey form in the mail, contact the Wildlife Diversity Program at (405) 521-4616.

you're seeing and report what you're viewing at wildlifedepartment.com. Accept the Winter Bird Survey Challenge. Choose two days during the Jan. 11 and Jan. 14 survey period to watch and record the birds visiting your winter feeders. Once you've met the challenge, submit your results online. Working together, Oklahomans can keep many eyes on the state's winter birds.

Sparrows 101

Seventeen sparrow species make their winter homes in Oklahoma. While sparrows are a pleasant and sometimes beautiful addition to our backyards, so many species can be a mixed blessing. For survey participants trying to tell one from another, it can get tricky! Fortunately, each species has distinguishing characteristics and not every sparrow turns up at bird feeders.

Peruse these ID tips to learn more about the six sparrows that appear most frequently at Oklahoma's winter feeders. Find more information like this at wildlifedepartment.com.

Sparrow Attraction & ID Tips

Feeding Behavior: Generally feed on or near the ground.

Favorite Feed: Scatter millet, milo and black oil sunflower seeds on the ground near the cover of shrubs and brush piles

Best Feeder Types: Ground level and platform-type feeders. Place a platform feeder on bricks or cinder blocks about 6 to 18 inches off the ground.

White-crowned Sparrow

Appearance: Four black stripes and three white stripes (tan in juveniles) extend from the base of the bill over the top of the head. Neck, throat, chest and belly are a uniform gray or dull white. Has a yellowish-pink bill.

Similar Species: Closely resembles the white-throated sparrow, which has a gray bill.

Feeding Behavior: Usually seen on the ground under feeders or near tall grass or shrubs.

Breeding Range: Breeds across much of Canada and the mountains of the western U.S.

OK Range: During winter, found statewide in brushy pastures, woodlands and thickets.

Notes: Common visitors to rural bird feeders and residential neighborhoods on the fringe of towns and cities. Usually seen in flocks of six to 30 birds. It often travels with Harris's sparrows and field sparrows in mixed-species flocks.

Harris's Sparrow

Appearance: Slightly larger than other sparrows with a slightly longer tail, in proportion to the rest of its body. White belly. May have a few brown spots and streaks on sides below wings. Bill is a distinct orange-pink color. Face plumage: variable amounts of black. On adults, bold black facial "masks" extend from the forehead, down the face and onto the throat and upper chest. Younger birds have a small amount of black streaking on the forehead, sides of the throat and across the upper chest in a pattern that resembles a necklace.

Similar Species: At first glance, it may resemble a male house sparrow, but it's larger and has a whiter belly and pink-orange bill.

Feeding Behavior: On the ground searching for seeds. Also seen near the cover of grasses, sunflowers and ragweeds, or thickets of plums, blackberries and other shrubs.

Breeding Range: Breeds in a small portion of the Canadian arctic.

OK Range: Winters in the southern Great Plains, as much as 20 percent of the population winters in the state.

Notes: Common in central and western Oklahoma in brushy fields, thickets, and woodland edges. Rare in the panhandle and eastern 1/4 of the state. Frequently visits rural bird feeders and neighborhoods on the periphery of towns. Not as adapted to urban living as the house sparrow and white-throated sparrow. Usually seen in flocks ranging from six to 50 birds.

Harris's Sparrow is one of Oklahoma's most distinctive and unique winter residents. Reported by 16 percent of survey participants.

Field Sparrow

The field sparrow is a familiar year-round resident across nearly all of Oklahoma. What it lacks in color, it makes up for with its beautiful song.

Appearance: Most easily identified by its pink bill and pink legs. Face, chest and belly are a uniform soft, grayish brown. A faint, white ring circles each eye. Predominantly medium-brown back, wings and tail. More colorful individuals may have a rusty tint to the crown, cheeks and back feathering. Each wing has two thin, white stripes (called wing bars). The bars are easy to overlook.

Similar Species: Closely resembles juvenile white-crowned sparrows, but adults look very different. Juvenile white-crowned sparrows are larger and lack the white eye ring.

Feeding Behavior: On the ground and under feeders. Feeds in small flocks alongside other sparrow species and dark-eyed juncos.

Breeding Range: Throughout the eastern U.S.

OK Range: Year-round resident. Does not appear in the western part of the panhandle.

Notes: During the winter, it usually travels in small flocks of five to 15 birds. It often travels with other seed-eating songbirds such as dark-eyed juncos, Harris's sparrows and white-crowned sparrows.

White-throated Sparrow

The White-throated sparrow is probably the most beautiful of Oklahoma's sparrows.

Appearance: White throat and gray breast. It has a dark gray bill, and a distinct yellow spot and a thin black stripe between the bill and each eye. Two thicker black stripes run from the bill across the top of the head. White or tan bands run between these four black stripes.

Similar Species: Closely resembles the white-crowned sparrow, which has a yellowish-pink bill and no yellow spot in front of each eye.

Feeding Behavior: Usually seen on the ground under feeders or beneath large trees.

Breeding Range: Nests widely across Canada and the northeastern U.S.

OK Range: Found in Oklahoma from late October through early May.

Notes: Commonly found in central and eastern Oklahoma's forested habitats. Frequently seen in neighborhoods with mature trees. Often seen in small groups of three to 15 birds, usually near the cover or shrubs and mature trees.

Song Sparrow

Appearance: An abundance of thick brown streaks on its side and chest readily distinguish it from other sparrows. Several streaks usually meet on the chest in a distinct, dark spot thicker than the surrounding streaks. It has a relatively long, rounded tail and a gray or light tan eyebrow stripe. A dark brown stripe runs from the base of the bill along both sides of the throat. Most song sparrows in Oklahoma have medium brown streaks over a pale grayish-brown

background. However, coloration may range from grayish to reddish brown to gray.

Similar Species: Quite distinct from other sparrows appearing at winter feeders.

Feeding Behavior: Normally seen alone at feeders or in very small groups of less than three or four birds.

Breeding Range: Extends across Canada and most of the northern and western portions of the U.S.

OK Range: Found throughout the state from mid-October through late April.

Notes: Most often seen near water in cattail marshes or tall bands of roadside grasses and weeds. Fairly common in open woodlands, pastures, and forest edges. Not reported in large numbers on the feeder survey.

House Sparrow

No discussion of sparrows would be complete without including this ubiquitous bird.

Appearance: Males: A distinctive black "mask" covers his face and chin. He has a silvery cheek patch and a gray head "cap." His bill may be straw-colored or black. Females: Plain grayish-tan plumage on her neck, chest, belly and head. She has a yellowish-tan stripe above each eye and a straw-colored bill.

Feeding Behavior: Readily perches and feeds on pole-mounted and hanging feeders. It behaves more like a finch than a native sparrow.

Breeding Range: Non-migrator and both breeds and winters across the entire U.S. and southern Canada and Mexico.

OK Range: Year-round resident.

Notes: Also called the English sparrow, this is the most abundant sparrow in urban areas across the United States. European immigrants introduced this species to the U.S. in the mid 1800's. It had established itself nationwide by the early 1900's. Though it resembles native sparrow species, it is actually part of a different group of sparrow-like birds know as weaver finches. The weaver finches are part of a diverse group of about 120 species distributed across Africa, Europe and Asia.