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Why Don't I Have Birds at my Feeders

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

A question that I have been getting a lot this winter is "why don't I have very many birds at my bird feeders". If you have had this thought it might make you feel better to know that I've got the same problem, and it's likely nothing that you've done. Hopefully, it's a temporary situation that will get better as we move through the year and even better next winter.

What's going on, as near as I can determine, is simple biological dynamics. A lot of the birds that come to our feeders are not year round residents. They are here for the winter and then they had back somewhere else as we move into spring and summer. As birds migrate and move into an area in the fall they don't arrive first at your feeders. They move into an area and are looking for and feeding on natural food items. This is generally seeds, not of crops, but of plants like sunflowers, ragweed, wild hemp, just anything that has small nutritious seeds. From there they slowly start to find their way to our feeders.

An early snow fall often pushes birds to our feeders but once that snow melts, the birds often go back to the natural food supplies. Normally, as winter progresses, the natural food supplies dwindle and are exhausted which also then starts to increase the number of birds at our feeders. I find that I often have the largest numbers of goldfinches at my feeders in May.

Now let's think back to a year ago. Starting in the early fall of 2017 we were in a drought. Not just A drought but an epically severe drought. That drought continued on through winter, spring and didn't break until August. All plants had very reduced growth. The number of seeds that germinated and started growing last spring was greatly reduced simply because it didn't rain. Plant growth was limited and greatly reduced from normal due to drought and heat. Once it started raining in August more plants started germinating, blooming and producing seed, but because of the shortening season, seed production was greatly reduced.

For areas around Milford Lake we had an additional impact. Lake elevations rose significantly once it started raining. Lake elevation rose and when it reached maximum level in late October it was over twelve feet above conservation pool level. Areas between normal pool level and the maximum pool level were essentially denuded of food production, in some places all vegetation was gone. Due to this loss of cover and food plants, a lot of the areas in the wetlands north of Wakefield held very few birds where there would normally be lots of bird activity.

When birds in migration arrive they will look for food and cover. Because plants in general throughout the area had reduced growth this year there was less cover. Seed production on these plants was also reduced. Many birds dispersed from traditional wintering areas looking for food and cover. Christmas Bird Counts conducted in December and very early January detected the same thing that many back yard bird feeders have noticed. Numbers of birds was down, way down, from the past several years. We have seen this phenomenon before.

Will bird numbers rebound next year? The odds are very likely that they will. Soil moisture conditions are in very good condition coming through winter and should remain into spring meaning that we will expect good early season plant growth. In the meantime, keep the bird feeders filled and the bird baths deiced. Northbound migrants are on their way and I would expect bird numbers at feeders to increase in the weeks ahead.

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