

Food for our souls

**By Charlene Peck
with photos by Ted Krug**

Jim Gardner readily admits purely selfish motives prompt him to attract hundreds of native and non-native birds to his spacious Hurdville yard.

Quite simply, he delights in watching them.

"It may sound corny, but I think birds are food for the soul," he explains. "The primary purpose of birds, from man's standpoint, is that they make people feel good."

As the general contractor for 69 houses on a bluebird line he runs from Deer Run Golf Course through open country to Orrville, Mr. Gardner appreciates why this species has been tagged "the bluebird of happiness".

"You see them and their beautiful colours up against the sky, and it makes you feel good," he explains.

There's also a reassuring predictability inherent in this pastime.

"We have hummingbirds working on the feeders all summer – we're inundated with them," says Mr. Gardner. "All of a sudden, with a week to go in August ... zip, the adult males disappear, they've gone, left. You can hang your hat on it, between the 8th and 12th of September, there will be no humming birds here at all."

Bird feeders can also count on blue jays coming around in September. Seldom seen all summer, although they nest in the area, the blue jays return like old friends, stirred by the slightest touch of a bite in the air.

Yet, all that predictability can vanish in an exciting instant of fluttering wings overhead, or a closer examination of that hint of colour in the trees, when an unexpected or rare species graces the birdwatcher's presence.

There's the wonder too, about where the feathered guests venture.

"I've got tree swallows nesting all over this property, and they'll produce great herds of young ones," says Mr. Gardner. "They're aerial feeders, of course, and you'll see them flying over the house, around and around. By the time August gets here, it's just like someone turned off the tap, there's not a sign of a tree swallow in the whole country. They disappear. And no one's been able to tell me where they go!!

"Everyone in the whole of southern Ontario, it seems to me, says: 'What happened to the tree swallow?' They laugh. Maybe they go to the moon, because the following spring, they're back with a gusto."

The predictability, the exciting possibility of spotting a rare species, the wonder and the mystery are all part of this increasingly popular pastime of bird feeding.

"It's very nice to say I'm helping the birds over the rough parts of winter, which we are, in certain conditions, like ice storms and things like that," Mr. Gardner says, candidly. "From a selfish standpoint, I feed the birds to see them, to view them."

Raised on a 10-acre homestead, in what is now Toronto, birds fascinated Mr. Gardner from the time of his earliest recollection.

It's a passion the 69-year-old retired Ministry of Natural Resources biologist has pursued throughout his life.

He's now an enthusiastic supporter of families adopting bird feeding programs around the home, with the hope that these will promote an understanding and appreciation of our natural world.

"Whether we like it or not, we're not 'it', we're a part of 'it'," is the adage he advocates.

As bird feeding becomes an increasingly popular pastime, he reassures newcomers not to be overwhelmed by the sheer number of families, and the variety of

species, colours, shapes and sizes, which might show up at a local feeder.

Learn a few at a time, suggests Mr. Gardner, who speaks frequently about winter bird feeding at the Parry Sound Nature Club's meetings.

"In the winter time around here, ten or 12 species will cover the birds you are likely to see at your feeder, so you're not talking huge numbers," he says. "My wife, June, in the 15 years we've been here, has become quite expert at identifying anything that comes along, even something she's never seen."

In fact, when the Parry Sound Nature Club conducted its annual Christmas bird count one year, Mrs. Gardner assumed a feeder watch role from her usual perch by the dining room window.

"She had a golden eagle fly over," Mr. Gardner says. "Twice she saw it and I would venture to say she's the first Christmas Bird Count feeder watcher ever to see a golden eagle fly over a bird feeder."

Feeding programs can begin with an offering of sunflower and mixed seed as early as September, to correspond with the beginning of migration. Throughout the month, a fairly rapid species change is occurring, as the birds nesting farther north move through.

"It's not a necessity to feed then – there's a multitude of riches as far as natural bird feed is concerned," explains Mr. Gardner. "But if you want to know what is migrating here, the easiest way is to have a little feed out."

"Every couple of days, something different shows up, and it's a similar thing in the spring, only more so," he comments.

As for the different ways of feeding feathered visitors, this avid birdwatcher suggests there are probably as many ideas as there are people thinking them up. Reference books on choosing bird feeders and bird houses are plentiful, and hobbyists are likely to fall into two groups. One is the old fashioned practical type, who believes the purpose of a birdhouse is to produce young birds. They, therefore, do not build fancy birdhouses, but construct them according to research, and to specifications based on what species they're hoping to attract.

The second, delights in constructing a grandiose feeder or birdhouse and may spend a season building it, and even enter it in a contest!