

BACKYARD NATURE

Berries are for the (migrating) birds

NATURE
TRAILSTIMOTHY
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September marked the beginning of fall when daylight periods are much shorter and insect life is less abundant. This is the time when northern nesting birds begin their migration south where food is more abundant. But along the way they must continue to feed and if possible even put on fat reserves.

Many birds rely on the fall ripening fruits for this purpose. Just the other day I saw several birds of about four different species invading my neighbor's black cherry tree. There were robins, both young and adults, starlings, grackles and blue jays. Individuals were constantly entering the branches harboring the berries and leaving to rest or digest in surrounding trees.

Black cherry berries have a high sugar content, though not high enough for tasty human consumption. Lumberjacks in the old days were probably pretty hard up for some liquid libation when they used the berries to make a drink. But birds eating lots of sweet

berries can get quick energy and even add some fat, as we all know if we eat too many sweets.

Actually the birds help the tree also. Those berries high in sugar rot very quickly; eating them first, while fattening up, helps the bird and ultimately the tree. Black cherry trees actually "want" the birds to eat the berries. Each berry has a hard pit or seed that could grow into a new tree. That new seed would have a better chance of growing if it was planted away from the adult plant. When the robin eats the berries, digests the sugars and voids the pit or seed, it is hoped it will land in a good place for growth. The main consequence of this action is that the robin often voids on your newly washed car, or laundry hanging out to dry. Berries that fall to the ground will be eaten by mice that can chew through the hard covering of the pit to eat the seed, thus eliminating any chance for a tree to grow.

When the sugary berries have been eaten, then birds concentrate on the fatty berries. Flowering dogwood berries are very fatty and will rot quickly if not eaten soon after ripening. Fortunately for migrating birds these berries ripen

during their crucial fattening period. Berries that contain less fat are saved until later in winter when food may be scarce.

Enjoy the birds eating berries, but beware of their ability to recognize new-

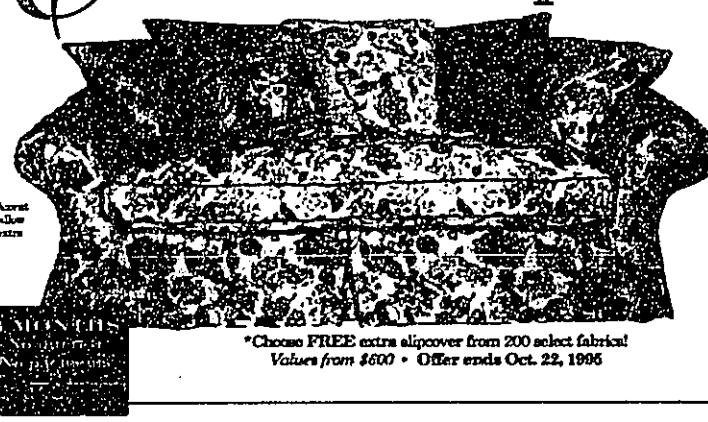
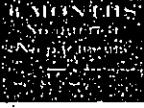
ly washed cars.

Tim Nowicki lives in Livonia and works as a naturalist with Independence Oaks County Park in Oakland County. To reach him by voice mail, call (313) 953-2047 and then his extension, 1874.



It's the berries: This hermit thrush enjoys a snack of berries from a tree.

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