



Mudpuppy's Pond

Kansas City Equals the Warm South

An Upclose Migration

During the fall, geese, bats, whales and even caribou move south to spend the winter in warmer habitats. If you are one of the lucky folks to have a female box elder tree growing outside your house, you may have some winter squatters, a lot of them as a matter of fact, sharing your warm house with you-Box Elder Bugs. The bugs are about a half an inch long, black with red lines on their bodies. Their wings lie flat.

In the fall, Box Elder Bugs gather in large numbers on the trunks of box elder trees, especially the female trees. From there, the female bugs "migrate" to protected places (a house) to overwinter. If they are near your house, they wiggle into cracks and crevices in and around walls, doors, windows and foundations on the south and west side of your house. And that is how they get inside the house.

On warm winter days, the bugs come out of their hiding places and crawl and fly about. And then we see them. They do not bite, they do not eat up your house or its contents, but they do leave little stains from their droppings.

A little dishwashing soap mixed with water in a spray bottle will kill the bugs, but only on contact. The real solution, though extreme, involves that box elder tree outside. Or caulking the cracks outside the house. Then, we can enjoy seeing these bugs emerge from their protected outdoor places on warm winter days to sun on the outsides of light colored buildings.

—Carla Bascom



No resident of Kansas City considers our area to be a warm, comfy wintering ground. But, for thousands of birds that spend their spring and summer in the far northern tundra or boreal forests, Kansas City and mid-America is the place to be in the winter. They do not join their other feathered friends on the longer migrations to the Gulf of Mexico, Central or South America. They choose our cold, snowy, open habitat to overwinter, successfully, year after year.

Who are these birds? Some come every year (i.e. juncos, bald eagles, native sparrows), some visit now and then (i.e. snowy owls, purple finches), and some are just passing through (i.e. pine siskins, some of the gulls). They all come for food. In the far north, when winter comes, water freezes (no fish), darkness covers everything (difficult to find seeds), small rodents hibernate (no prey) and insects die. The northern birds come to our area because we have food.



Saw-Whet Owl
(Photo: MDC)

Cold is not a problem. These birds can handle sub-zero temperatures. At night, you can find them roosting in dense pines or cedars, or in flocks on the ground, keeping warm. The little saw-whet owls catch a mouse, eat half of it, hide the rest where it freezes, defrost it the next night by incubating it, and then eat it. The chickadee conserves energy by roosting in a woodpecker hole at night where it lowers its body temperature to 21 degrees F. Finches have crops that they load up with seed and then retire to a sheltering cedar tree where they can eat the seed in relative warmth. The rough-legged hawk of the arctic tundra has legs covered with feathers all the way down to the top of their feet which help keep their legs warm. Fox sparrows store fat during the day that is used up during the night to warm their bodies. They roost in cedars at night, too.

All these winter visitors can handle the cold. Mother Nature has provided them with all these strategies to survive winter. Lucky for us, because we get to see a whole new group of birds here in Kansas City each winter.



Fox Sparrow
(Photo: Jim Rathert, courtesy of MO Dept. of Conservation)

—Carla Bascom