



Ready, set, fly! (From a Winged Mother's Perspective)

by Peggy Sullivan, Master Gardener

Listen up everybody! Here's the flight plan for this winter. Our flock will be cruising through the central San Joaquin Valley, where we can usually find an abundance of food. Here are a few reminders of what to look for.

Trees and Shrubs: Look for the gardens with trees and bushes. There are too many homeowners who don't like trees because they think they are messy, but we benefit so much from them. Massive green lawns and a few scattered trees offer less places for us to find food and shelter. Do you remember that yard last year that had lots of foliage for us to find refuge from the wind, shelter from storms, and safety from predators who like to eat us birds? Let's find that garden and visit it again!



Pine cones coated with peanut butter and a mix of seeds then hung in trees make great bird feeders.

Water: Listen for the sound of water. Sometimes it's hard to find a clean puddle for drinks and baths. Some of the bird-friendly-humans are thoughtful about providing birdbaths and fountains. They make sure that there are trees and bushes nearby, so that we can quickly reach safe hiding if something threatens us. Do you remember hearing the bubbling of that one water fountain? It beckoned us to come visit their garden, so we swooped down onto the shallow bowl on top, and the whole flock had a real beach party there! We cooled off, and ridded our feathers of all that flight dust and itches. Now, that was a party to remember!

Food: There are 2 things to look for: natural seeds and birdfeeders.

Natural seeds and berries: Many of those valley gardeners plant trees and plants with seeds that they know we like such as coneflower, sunflowers, asters, goldenrod, coreopsis, bay laurel, dogwood, and more. In those gardens, we can find

enough nourishment to keep up our energy as we continue our migration journey. Too many of the humans keep their gardens so tidy that they cut all the blossoms from their plants and leave little for us to eat, but those folks who leave the seed heads on the plants or just cut the stems and leave the seed heads lying on the ground are really thoughtful. Just be careful that you don't eat too many of those pyracantha berries; they might make you tipsy.

Bird feeders: Bird feeders are great, especially if the owners keep them filled through the winter. Sometimes there is so much millet-filler in some of those birdseed mixes that we can't find the good stuff, like black-oil sunflowers, shelled peanuts and thistle. Do you remember how last year, some children coated

pinecones with peanut butter, dipped them into a great mix of seed, and hung them in the trees for us to find and enjoy? And then there was that one big feeder in a Chinese pistache tree we visited that had a bunch of hulled sunflower seeds in the mix. Wow, those were real treats!

So remember, as you're winging your way across the skies above that great valley, be on the lookout for those trees, bushes, birdbaths, fountains, and bird-friendly "diners" where we can eat and rest. Then be sure to sing a song for those gardeners who provided you a great winter garden. It's a long journey, but we can do it!

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White crowned sparrows are one of many birds that overwinter here and depend upon seeds for survival.