

# Watching feathered friends always a pleasure

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by Helen Fancher

Many of our birds stay with us the year round in the wonderful climate of the Desert Foothills. But with each new season, we entertain additional feathered friends, from either the north or the south.

It is always a thrill to greet the first arrival of each new species. Many people have mourned the departure of our various summer hummingbirds, but, have you had the opportunity to welcome the Anna's hummer who winters here? The male Anna's is one of the most beautiful of its species. It is the only hummer whose crown and throat are both a deep rose red when the sun hits them.

One of my favorite winter friends is a little black-throated sparrow. The large triangular black patch on his throat and his black lores contrast dramatically with his white eyebrow and whisker stripes and his white underparts. His back, wings and tail are a clean medium gray. He always looks immaculately groomed like a gentleman dressed for an evening dinner party.

He is among those birds that bring us a morning chorus soon after sunrise. After a bird has sung

his fill, he flies to the ground and scratches for feed under the low bushes. We could learn something from his order of activities.

We look forward each fall to the arrival of another sparrow - the white crowned. They often display their striking head feathers by puffing out the crown to form a low crest.

In one of the studies made of the homing abilities of birds, 574 white crowns were banded and sent from California to a reserve in Maryland where they were released in October.

A year later, eight of these little creatures, each weighing about an ounce, were found back in California on their normal north-south migration route. Some say birds can navigate by the stars. However they manage, it is one of the miracles of creation.

A shy visitor to our small winter bird feeder is the Lincoln's sparrow. I distinguish him from other sparrows by his gray crown stripe bordered by reddish or brown stripes and his broad gray eyebrows. He has a buffy wash with fine streaks on his breast and sides. I notice that

he will raise a slight crest when disturbed. He also is one of our better singers.

Normally we wake every morning to a marvelous chorus of bird voices, not only our winter visitors, but our year round choristers such as the house finches, curved bill and Bendire's thrashers, cardinals, and numerous others.

There is usually someone out of tune, like the raucous cactus wren; or someone loudly demanding to be heard, such as the gila woodpecker or a flicker. But each one has his own endearing personality. We love the tiny, yellow-headed verdin with a voice much louder than his little hyperactive body.

On one recent morning, we woke to a rather ominous silence. On investigation, we observed a large gray hawk sitting in our bird bath under a palo verde tree. He sat so still for so long I thought he must be sick, so I called our local bird expert, Eleanor Radke. She told me we had a Cooper's hawk and this behavior was quite normal for him.

This hawk preys on song birds

and knew when he had found a good thing. We were amazed that every other bird could have disappeared out of sight and sound so completely. We chased off the intruder and our friends soon reappeared.

There are a few pleasures as great as observing our feathered friends, counting the varieties that can be seen in one short period of time, and comparing notes with friends who live along a different wash or on another mountain. Soon it will be time to watch for early spring arrivals.