



Tales from a Sisters Naturalist

by Jim Anderson

Flying through winter

Winter's hard on wildlife, just as it is on you and me. But like you and me, birds that spend winter with us have methods they can use to stay warm and dry, like layers of clothing that keep us warm. (The butterfly has built-in antifreeze.)

Songbirds, quail, waterfowl and the like also are well suited (pardon the pun) to survive winter, with downy feathers close to their warm bodies. The down is like warm woolen long-johns to us, trapping air close to our skin keeping in the heat. A bird's outside feathers that prevent cold wind, snow and rain from reaching their insulating down are like our jackets, overcoats, and wool hats.

I know for sure it is nigh unto impossible to freeze a great horned owl to death. Back in the 1960s, a fellow called me at Oregon Museum of Science and Industry to tell me he had a dead great horned owl he picked up off the shoulder of the highway, and asked what he should do with it.

He lived just a few miles from my home in Beaverton, so I told him to put it in the freezer and I'd be by to pick it up as soon as I could. It so happened that an unexpected meeting sent me off in his direction, so I stopped by that afternoon.

As I walked into his house I asked if he'd checked the owl for a band.

"No, I forgot to, but here,"

he said, taking hold of the freezer door handle, "you check it and take the owl with you."

He opened the door, still looking at me, and when he turned his head, he yelped, "What the...!" and slammed the door shut. He just stood there staring at me and said — no I can't tell you what he said — but it was very colorful and intimated that owl was supposed to be dead...

We both peeked in very carefully as he slowly opened the freezer door, and sure enough, the owl was standing upright, blinking at us. Yeah, he had a broken wing and wasn't very alert, but he was a living — albeit severely damaged — adult male great horned owl. (I'm sorry to say he did pitch-it-in later, from injuries suffered from the vehicle strike).

From the moment they hatch — late winter and early spring in most places — owls have a thick coat of down covering their entire body. The insulating qualities are superb at keeping air trapped in the soft down, maintaining the owl's body operating temperature at about 109 degrees. To say an owl is "hot stuff" is no exaggeration.

Hummingbirds that choose to spend winter here instead of going to Mexico with their kin — because people leave their feeders up — use fat to survive. They can go into a stupor for 36 hours without food or warmth. There are hummingbirds coming to feeders in Oregon right now that have survived the cold nights, with just enough warmth during the day for them to leave their shelter, slurp up sugar water and search for insects.

Wintering birds as a whole need that same protein and water, especially. When a bird attempts to slake its thirst using their body heat to melt snow and ice into water it uses too much energy. Yes, sage grouse can get away with it, but robins and most feeder-birds cannot. They must have

flowing or open water to stay alive.

Robins can get by on juniper berries, old apples and other fruit, but not without water. They will go into serious stress without water — the same for the hummers, goldfinches and other small birds. Please, keep your water feature flowing; the colder it is outside, the more birds need the water.

Even the migrators have a tough time of it. As we have seen, waterbirds of all kinds crash, sometimes in the middle of the highway, when they're making their night migratory flights and run into a weather front. They quickly run out of fuel, and in the case of grebes, will usually die if they can't find water to land in. That's when wildlife rehabbers like Elise Wolf of Sisters Country become very busy trying to heal injuries on



PHOTO BY DICK TIPTON

Saw-whet owl wintering in one of Dick Tipton's kestrel nesting boxes.

waterbirds and keep them fed and food to go on when the until they have the strength weather cooperates.



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