

Spotting winter birds in the hills of Haywood County

BY SANDRA BARNES

Special to The Mountaineer

Looking out the window on a frosty morning for birds, mountain residents may only see black crows hovering in trees and yards in cold winter months.

But there's more than meets the eye of the casual observer.

With a little knowledge, a variety of bird species can be spotted this time of year — from great horned owls to small tufted titmice — says Michael Skinner, executive director of the Balsam Mountain Trust.

Juncos, cardinals, blue jays, nut hatches, the pileated woodpecker and northern flicker are among other birds that are winter residents.

Large birds of prey such as hawks and bald eagles also can be both residents and migratory species in this area, he adds. At Lake Junaluska, nesting bald eagles have been spotted recently.

"You have to know what you're looking for," Skinner says. "I see red-tailed hawks year round."

The time of day is important for successful bird watching, he notes. At dawn and dusk when birds are feeding, people have the best chance of seeing them.

However, some species such as the colorful belted kingfisher can be seen at various times of the day as they hover around streams looking for aquatic food. And occasionally, an-



LUCKY SIGHTING — Hope, the bald eagle, can be seen at the nature center of the Balsam Mountain Trust. Bald eagles recently have been spotted in a nesting area at Lake Junaluska.

other water bird, the great blue heron, can be spotted flying overhead.

Global warming has increased the numbers and types of birds that are now remaining here because of warmer winter temperatures, Skinner says.

"Robins and bluebirds are starting to stay around," he notes.

However, this year the recent polar vortex that brought chilling weather to this area pushed away some of these species for the time being.

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“These animals adapt to the best of their ability,” Skinner says.

Skinner recommends that bird watchers use field guides to help identify birds. His preferences are the National Geographic and Sibley field guides. Also there are apps people can access such as iNaturalist and iBird Pro Guide to Birds, which are helpful, he adds.

While some birds such as woodpeckers can be heard near residents’ homes in this forested mountain community, there are good bird viewing areas off the Blue Ridge Parkway such as Devil’s Courthouse, Skinner says. Even when the parkway is closed, it is possible to walk to this overlook by parking near the N.C. 215 intersection.

At the Oconaluftee Visitor Center near Cherokee in the Great Smoky

Mountains National Park, birds such as the belted kingfisher can be seen along the river in the winter time. Another popular bird viewing area is Whiteside Mountain near Cashiers.

The Balsam Mountain Trust also offers public bird viewing programs for area residents at its nature center at the Balsam Mountain Preserve near Sylva.

On Feb. 24, the Jurassic program will explore adaptations and behaviors of the dinosaurs by taking a close-up look at their modern cousins: resident birds of prey and reptiles. The Balsam Trust houses a variety of native animals including

birds of prey.

The trust also offers outreach programs at schools, libraries and community events, which include birds from the nature center. The trust also can accommodate public groups for programs at the nature center and preserve.

The Balsam Mountain Trust is an associated non-profit organization focused on preserving natural and cultural resources of the southern Blue Ridge Mountains through education and conservation leadership.

For more information on the Balsam Mountain Trust, visit the website at www.bmtrust.org or call 828-631-1060.



ALL ABOUT BIRDS — Michael Skinner, executive director of the Balsam Mountain Trust, talks with youngsters about birds during an educational program. He is holding a screech owl, which is native to the area.