

Northern Bayberry - Helping Our Winter Birds



As the temperatures drop and fall colors fade, many of us find ourselves wondering if wintering birds have enough food to make it through the frigid nights. If this is something you think about, then you may be interested to know about a native shrub called Northern Bayberry *Morella (Myrica) caroliniensis*. Its fruits are rich in fats and nutrients that migrating and wintering birds need to survive.

Songbirds, such as the Black-capped Chickadee, while small, has a large surface area-to-volume ratio which means that it loses body heat quickly.

Throughout the winter Chickadees feed on insects (especially their eggs and pupae) seeds, berries, small fruits and animal fat. Chickadees must forage and consume more than half their body weight daily. Doing so enables them to store enough energy in the form of a fat layer (approximately 10% of their body weight) that will completely burn off overnight. Fats found in the fruits of native plants such as Northern Bayberry provide the most concentrated form of energy enabling Chickadees to survive a cold night.

Northern Bayberry is native to the Eastern United States; bayberry is a deciduous to semi-evergreen shrub with glossy, fragrant gray-green foliage that grows 3 -12 ft. tall. The female plants produce blueish-white waxy fruits shaped like berries called drupes. The fruits boast a high percentage of fat that birds need during the winter months. At 50.3% fat, the fruits of the bayberry bush are not only cherished by birds, they have also been used to make fragrant candles and soaps since colonial times.

Why native shrubs? You may have seen birds eating berries from burning bush (which is on the CT Invasive Plant List), or other exotic non-native species and wondered what the difference is between the fruits of Northern Bayberry and the fruits of non-native species. A study published in *Biological Conservation* speaks to the observations and facts that not all berries are equal. Birds seek and prefer the fruits from native species. Since native plants and native birds coevolved, it is native plants that provide nutrient-rich food sources when birds need them most. Fruits from non-native species are lower in vital nutrients than those found on native species and can poorly affect a bird's level of nutrition, especially for migrating and wintering birds.

Glen Somogie, Land/Facilities Manager at the Bent of the River Audubon Center encourages homeowners to plant native trees and shrubs. He says doing so will give wintering birds a selection of proper fat and nutrients. "Store bought seed and suet can and will help but may also form bad unwanted habits for other animals. With loss of habitat in mind, creating natural spaces with native plants in your yard is a great way to help birds survive the winter and help fuel many other species through migration."

In addition to providing nutrient rich foods in the winter, native shrubs provide a buffet of food in the form of caterpillars and insects during the breeding season. A breeding pair of Black-capped Chickadees must forage between 6,000-9,000 caterpillars to raise a single clutch of young, according to Doug Tallamy, a Professor of Entomology and Wildlife Ecology at the University of Delaware.

Not only is Bayberry a larval host plant for the large and magnificent Columbia Silkmoth, Bayberry is an important food source for Yellow-rumped Warblers and more. To see a complete list please visit <https://www.exploringbirds.com/posts/birds-attracted-to-northern-bayberry>

Planting a border of bayberry has many benefits. As a dense shrub, bayberry creates habitat by providing food and nesting options. Plant in woodland gardens, as privacy screens or along roadways. Bayberry's roots spread

through suckers controlling erosion and stabilizing soil. It can tolerate poor soils as it draws nitrogen out of the air and fixes it to the soil.

Arrowwood viburnum, Eastern Red Cedar, Staghorn Sumac and Sweetbay Magnolia are some other great choices when choosing native plants that are a valuable food sources for migrating and wintering birds. Choosing to plant even one or two of these native plants in our landscapes can make all the difference in giving back to our local birds and wildlife.