



Urban Wildlife Issues  
Wildlife Rescue column by Nicky Fried  
as appearing in the *Burnaby NOW*

## **Bad weather tough on critters**

Like many other Vancouverites, I hail from another part of the world. The day I was born, it was likely 30 degrees Celsius, not uncommon for the middle of December in the middle of Africa. People tell me I should be thankful to live on the moderate West Coast.

And I am. And, after 15 years, I can now say that I tolerate the rain. However, the past month has been more taxing than usual. A week of snow followed by torrential rains is not my idea of fun. Of course, I know better than to complain to the hardy types at the Wildlife Rescue Association of B.C.

Instead, I say things like: "My, how hard all this snow must be for the little animals. I wonder how they find food?" Or maybe: "What do the birds do when it rains like this?"

People then shake their heads and make sympathetic noises. Because, of course, our wild neighbours are far more at risk in inclement and unseasonable weather than I, safe and cozy in my warm home. As usual, following a heavy snow, the Wildlife Rescue Association plays host to a number of red breasted sapsuckers.

Sapsuckers, with their scarlet heads and breasts, are fascinating for their feeding habits. They make shallow holes in the soft bark of trees and feed on the sap and the insects attracted to the sap. Why do we get sapsuckers in the care centre after a snowstorm? Some say that they are unable to feed in very cold weather because the tree sap freezes; others disagree, quite strongly. The other camp theorizes that sapsuckers are dazzled by the snow and, as a result, often strike windows. Still other experts suggest that, because of their bright colours, they are more visible to predators against the snow and exhaust themselves attempting to escape.

This just goes to prove that when you have two experts, you will always have three opinions. The cold is also hard on aquatic birds. When water freezes over, young herons have to compete with older, savvier birds for a spot to fish from.

Often they are not successful and we give a hand in getting the exhausted youngsters through winter. It's a fatiguing time for birds and animals as they must search even more diligently to get at an already low supply of food. In one night, dark-eyed juncos will go through a quarter of their body weight in fat just to keep warm.

So when it's snowy and cold, birds will likely hunker down in trees, coming out in the warmer part of the day, to frantically search for food. Rain too, has its disadvantages. During heavy rain, insects don't fly. Insect eaters, like chickadees, must adapt or die. They will take to eating aphids and bugs.

Of course, finding such different fare is much harder work and the birds will have to expend a great deal more energy. Diving birds are also at risk. While flying at night, loons and grebes often mistake wet highways for bodies of water and crash land on them. These birds have their legs far back on their bodies, ideal for swimming, but making them well nigh useless on land. The poor creatures are unable to take off from solid ground.

If you come across a stranded diving bird, take it to the nearest wildlife sanctuary. We had two trumpeter swans, both of which had similar experiences. One of the birds had clipped a power line on West Broadway in Vancouver and came down. We think the flock might have become disorientated and another bird came down a few blocks away. Like diving birds, the swans are not great at taking off from solid land; they need space. Luckily a kind soul brought them in to us. We had the pleasure of treating and caring for them before releasing them at Reifel Migratory Bird Sanctuary, where a flock of 300 swans is currently in residence.

As I write, the temperature is an unseasonable 10 degrees Celsius. My crocuses are budding. I'm hoping that the berries don't come out too early, or yields will be lower in the spring, when they will be most needed.

Some like it hot - nature needs it seasonal!