

Brown creeper



Certhia americana

I was trying to decide which bird to write about for February, when I glanced out the window and saw one of my favorite, if elusive winter birds. A tiny Brown creeper landed on the big oak tree just east of my house, and thrilled me with its unique behavior.

Many of you may never have seen a Brown creeper, but they're fairly common in our area during the winter. They are rather hard to spot. Not only are they tiny, only about five inches long, but they give new meaning to the word "camouflage".

Nothing looks quite as much like the bark of a tree as the Brown creeper. Their upperparts are a dark brown, heavily marbled with paler spots. From even a few feet away, it can be hard to notice them.

The underside of a Brown creeper is white, but because they are usually more or less "flattened" on a tree trunk, their white tummies seldom show.

So if they're so small and well camouflaged, how do you ever see a Brown Creeper? When I see one, it's most often just by chance. When they fly, the movement catches my eye. Once you spot one, they're pretty easy to follow as they go about their endless routine.

Brown creepers are large tree specialists. They land near the bottom of a tree trunk and then start zigzagging up and around the tree. As they go up, they constantly probe into the crevasses in the bark with their long curved, needle-like bills.

When they've gone as high as they like, they flutter down to the base of a nearby tree and, start all over again. It's this distinctive downward flight from tree to tree that helps us to spot and follow them.

You may also hear them. They have a very high pitched "tsee" call. However, if you're at all hard of hearing, like I am, their call may be too high pitched to be heard.

Brown creepers are very unique birds. They are the only member of their bird family that lives in North America. They have long, spikey, stiff tails that allow them to creep up tree trunks. ("Long" is relative. Remember, they are only five inches "long".) They reach deep into cracks in bark with their sharp bills to find the tiny spiders, bugs and insect eggs and larvae that are mostly too small or hidden too deep for Woodpeckers or Nuthatches.

No other bird uses the Brown creepers repetitive tree to tree to tree food searching technique. I think it's very

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appropriate and rather amusing that a group of Brown creepers is called a “Spiral”.

I do not know of another bird that has a closer association with the bark than the Brown creeper. Although they do not nest in our area, when they return north in the spring, they actually nest in bark! They spread their wings, flatten themselves against the tree and remain motionless. They become virtually undetectable, living bark.

Brown creepers have not yet become “feeder savvy”, so they’re not frequent visitors to our offerings. They do occasionally come to suet or peanut feeders.

Quite a few years ago I had a Brown creeper in my yard that I named “Hoover”. Now I don’t ordinarily give wild birds names, but this guy was special. My peanut feeders were hanging directly over my wide, horizontal deck railing. Tiny pieces of peanuts would land on the railing as the birds used these feeders. Every morning at 8:30, Hoover would show up and work back and forth on the railing, getting every single scrap! He was so fun to watch, and my close-up side view of him was extraordinary! (They’re really “flat”.)

He was faithfully there every morning three winters in a row. I still miss his daily heartwarming performances. Spotting a Brown creeper always brings a big smile to my face. If you’ve never seen a Brown creeper, keep your eyes peeled for movement whenever you’re around big trees this winter.

These little guys are fascinating to watch, and a great addition to anyone’s bird list.

FEBRUARY BIRD NOTES

Remember that when the temperatures are below freezing, water is hard to find if you’re a bird!

Grit is another bird essential that gets scarce when our world is covered in ice and snow. You can mix it in with your birdseed, or offer it in a separate, covered feeder. Oriole jelly feeders can serve as winter grit feeders. Sprinkle a few seeds on top of the grit to help the birds find it.

Suet is a huge attraction for many birds this time of year.

Great Horned Owls are still “hooting and hollering” as they settle into their nesting season.

Spring is coming. Listen for it! Cardinals are beginning to sing and Chickadees are exchanging their soft “Fee Bee” love songs.

Come visit Ellen at the Basic Birder’s Booth during the North Iowa Home Show, February 24th – 26th. Ellen will be giving seminars on Birds and Bird Feeding at 4:30, Friday, February 24th and at 5:00, Saturday, February 25th. We hope to see you there!

Enjoy your birds!

Ellen S. Montgomery

