

## OF SNOW—BIRDS AND SORGHUM

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Snow Buntings, popularly known as Snow-Birds, or Snowflakes, are birds of uncommon interest. Our only snow-white sparrow, they are tinged rust-brown in winter but present sharply contrasting black backs, wing-tips and tail in summer. Six to seven inches in length and weighing less than an ounce, they are nevertheless incredibly hardy. Snow-birds are the only land birds that nest at the top of the world. They are found in summer at Peary Land in extreme northern Greenland, within 600 miles of the North Pole. Circumpolar in distribution, these waifs of the high Arctic are also known throughout northern Eurasia.

In our latitude, we are accustomed to meeting with Snow Buntings in small flocks, from late October to early April. If we are lucky we may chance upon flocks of 50 to 100 birds. In more than a half century of bird-watching, I have seen, on four occasions only, flocks of up to 300 birds. In his excellent annotated list, "A Half Century of Bird Life in Berks County" published in 1947, the late Earl L. Poole designated the Snow Bunting as "a rare winter visitant" and cited a handful of records. To be sure, in recent years buntings have occurred locally somewhat more frequently.

So when my friend, Lyle Laysen of Leesport phoned me excited in late February that "a huge flock of snow-birds" could be seen along the Hawk Mountain road in the Kempton area, I could hardly contain myself. But I was also skeptical. "Just how many birds did you see?" I queried my friend. His response was emphatic: "*Thousands!*"

And so my wife and I and some friends lost no time in getting over to the area at the top of Berks County. The bleak, snow-covered upland fields and pastures looked no different from the wide open expanses of my own turf near New Ringgold. Arriving on the scene, however, we could hardly believe our eyes. We were greeted by a blizzard of birds! Snow-birds filled the sky; they perched briefly in bunches in small trees; they festooned the utility wires; they swirled back and forth and around and about—a dizzying, overwhelming spectacle. Swirling masses of birds rushed past and overhead, the wind in their myriad wings, in a chorus of chirps and sweet musical twitterings.

It was almost impossible to determine numbers, for birds were in constant motion, in small flocks and large. Finally one swarm swept low over the road and within one hundred feet. By estimating groups of about 100 birds passing at right angles to us, I was able to determine that there were upwards of 3,000 birds—a truly conservative figure we all agreed.

There had to be a good reason for this extraordinary gathering of Snow-birds. And the "reason" stretched before our eyes—a *6-acre field of sorghum* providing an enormous banquet for the birds. Also attracted to the sorghum, about 150 tree sparrows, also winter visitors from Canada, and well over a hundred mourning doves. An abundance of field mice shared the banquet and the mice in turn attracted rodent-eating hawks like red-tails, and marsh hawks. Beyond the sorghum field was a stretch of field black with freshly spread cow manure, and here disported hundreds of horned larks, another species from northern Canada.

Now Snow-birds, as we well know, feed on all sorts of grass and weed seeds including pigweed and ragweed when they visit our part of the world. But here was all this sorghum, which the birds preferred to their more normal fare. Loaded with seeds, the dense, upright panicles of the sorghum offered an unparalleled feast; and the birds were tackling the sorghum with vigor.

Sorghum, also known as kafir-corn or milo, comes in many varieties. It is an important grain, cultivated for fodder, for syrup and broom-making. The seeds are bitter in early fall. Curing slowly through the winter the seeds become sweet, highly palatable and hence eagerly sought by the birds.

The following day we returned, again with bird-watching friends, and the Snow-birds put on an even better show; wheeling, swirling, pulsating against the clear blue sky; running, hopping, jumping over the gleaming snow—a marvelous vitality. And always the birds returned to the sorghum to pull apart the panicles; and then an irruption, a confusion of birds in flight. Once in the air, however, the flocks displayed cohesion of movement, order and unity.

Parenthetically I should mention that still another gathering of "thousands" of Snow-birds was being enjoyed by bird-watchers 35 miles to the southwest, near Ephrata. And again, the magnet that drew the birds was a field of sorghum.

These great avian spectacles began in late January or early February, apparently. A steady build-up took place and we probably saw the peak numbers in late February. The Snow-birds begin drifting toward their boreal homelands during March. How fortunate we were to enjoy this once in a lifetime, unforgettable experience, this historic event in the annals of ornithology. And lest we forget, our thanks to the farmer who unwittingly brought on the drama.