



January - Week 3

*Winter Warmth:
A time to fluff, cuddle, gorge & shiver*

Although cold stretches in December or February are known to occur, January is generally our coldest month of the year. The average high and low temperatures are about five degrees colder in January than in other winter months, with the third week in January being the coldest statistically. A walk in the woods or a glance out a window toward a birdfeeder can make us wonder how delicate looking little creatures survive winter winds and freezing temperatures during these cold days and nights.

Feathers are an obvious answer. Fluffy down underwear is covered by layers of sleek, strong but lightweight feathers specialized to each part of the body. Tiny muscles lift the feathers, creating hundreds of insulating pockets of air warmed by the bird's own body. But why does a winter bird jump in a birdbath? It is not for the heat. Those feathers need to be clean and well maintained. Birds use beaks to clean, comb and straighten the insulating feather structures.

Some small birds and woodpeckers that don't have down feathers huddle in cavities, coming out to feed once the warming sun has risen. Food powers the busy bodies of chickadees which weigh less than a half ounce and can maintain a body temperature of about 100oF, even when air temperatures drop below zero. To survive, they must consume about 35 percent of their weight every day. And just like us, they, and other birds also shiver to keep warm!

So, watch from a warm window or cover your head, put on warm layers and go outside to observe the spectacle of survival. Record the weather conditions. What species of birds do you see? How do the birds look? Do they appear to be "puffed up" while sitting on a perch? At a feeder, do species have favorite foods? How often does a bird come in a measured period of time? What time(s) of day are birds most active at the feeder? If you are able to visit the shores of a local lake or river, observe the birds there. Waterfowl have very lush feathers. What behaviors do you see that help these birds stay warm on ice or in frigid winter waters? Document your observations either in the field or when you return to a warmer environment.