

*Round Robin Red Breast*

By Kim Smith

What's that you say? A *flock* of robins, in winter?

Yes, yes! Sweetly singing liquid notes. A *flock* in my garden.

What does a hungry round robin find to eat in a winter garden?

Red, red winterberries and holly, rime-sweetend crabapples, and orchard fruits.

And how does a winter robin keep warm?

Why, blanketed together with air-puffed fluffed feathers.

How long will they stay, how long can they last in the frost?

Only as there are fruits on the bough and berries on the bush.

Round robin red breast, silhouette in bare limb,

Calling away winter, cheer cheerio and cheer-up.

The widely distributed and beloved American Robin hardly needs an introduction. The American Robin is the largest member of the thrush family—thrushes are known for their liquid birdsongs and the robin is no exception. Their unmistakable presence is made known when, by early spring, the flocks have dispersed and we see individual robins strutting about the landscape with fat worms dangling and hear the male's beautiful birdsongs, signaling to competing males to their establish territory, as well as to entice prospective females.

The boundaries of the American Robin winter migration areas are not clearly defined. The robin's winter range covers southern Canada to Guatemala, compared to their summer nesting range, which extends from the tree limit of Canada to southern Mexico. Robins that nest in Massachusetts, for the most part, migrate further south. Robins nesting in northern Canada migrate to their tropic-of-New England get-away.

During the past week Cape Ann has been home to a large flock of robins and we have had the joy of hosting numerous numbers in late afternoon and early morning. I couldn't help but notice their arrival in our garden. Their shadows descended, crisscrossing the window light, followed by a wild rumpus in the 'Dragon Lady' hollies. This pair of hollies is planted on opposing sides of the garden path, alongside the home office. I have learned to stealthily sneak up to a window, as any sudden activity inside startles birds that are investigating our garden, and they quickly disperse. Dining not only on berries of the 'Dragon Ladies', but also the 'Blue Princess' Meserve holly and winterberry bushes, were dozens of noisy, hungry robins. These winter nomads flock to trees and shrubs that hold their fruit through winter, feasting on red cedar, American holly, Meserve hollies, chokecherries, crabapples and juniper. Robins traveling near the sea will comb the shoreline for mollusks and go belly-deep for fish fry. Depleting their food supply, they move onto the next location. Gardens rife with fruiting shrubs and trees make an ideal destination for our migrating friends. Imagine if on our tiny lot we can host collections of songbirds and Lepidoptera, what one who lives with greater acreage and

makes a garden planted for wildlife could accomplish. Oh the possibilities!

The garden designed to attract pairs of summer resident robins as well as flocks of winter travelers would be comprised of trees and shrubs for nest building, plants that bear fruit and berries that are edible during the summer and fall, and plants that bear fruits that persist through the winter months. Suburban gardens and agricultural areas provide the ideal habitat, with open fields and lawns for foraging insects as well as trees and hedgerows in which to build their nests.

Robins in New England breed from April through July, often bearing three clutches. Nests are built in the crotch of trees and dense bushes, five to fifteen feet above ground, and some are occasionally made on the ground or built on protruding ledges of homes. The female robin weaves a cup-shaped foundation of coarse grass, twigs, paper and feathers, and then lines the bowl with mud she smears and packs firmly with her breast. Later she adds soft fibers such as fine grass and downy feathers to cushion the egg. The first nest is usually placed in an evergreen tree or shrub; for each subsequent clutch a new nest is built and generally placed in a deciduous tree.

The following plants, suggested with robins in mind, will also attract legions of songbirds (and Lepidoptera). The list is comprised primarily of indigenous species with a few non-native, but not invasive plants included.

Trees for nesting ~ American Holly (*Ilex opaca*), Eastern Red Cedar (*Juniperus virginiana*), Red Maple (*Acer rubrum*), Sugar Maple (*Acer saccharum*), Flowering Dogwood (*Cornus florida*).

Summer and autumn fruit bearing trees, shrubs and vines for robins ~ Black Cherry (*Prunus serotina*), Blackberry (*Rubus spp.*), Flowering Dogwood (*Cornus florida*), Gray Dogwood (*C. racemosa*), Red-osier Dogwood (*C. sericea*), Silky Dogwood (*C. amomum*), Elderberry (*Sambucus canadensis*), Apple (*Malus pumila*), Virginia Rose (*Rosa virginiana*), Highbush Blueberry (*Vaccinium corymbosum*), Lowbush Blueberry (*Vaccinium angustifolium*), Wild Grape (*Vitis spp.*).

Trees and shrubs with fruits persisting through winter ~ Winterberry (*Ilex verticillata*), Mountain Ash (*Sorbus americana*), Crabapple (*Malus spp.*), Sargent's Crabapple (*Malus sargentii*), American Holly (*Ilex opaca*), Meserve Hollies (*Ilex x meserveae*), Eastern Red Cedar (*Juniperus virginiana*), Common Juniper (*Juniperus communis*), Chokecherry (*Prunus virginiana*), Smooth Sumac (*Rhus glabra*), Staghorn Sumac (*Rhus typhina*).



American Robin ~ *Turdus migratorius*

