

## Backyard Briefs

*A weekly column*

*By Judy Jessop, Nature Conservancy Volunteer*

Though many of the millions of birds that migrate through our region manage to slip by us without being noticed, the American Robin is an exception. During fall migration, flocks of these birds are bound to stop by your backyard as they range far and wide searching for food. The reason you find them plucking berries from your dogwoods and cedar trees is because, by this time of year, they have switched from earthworms and insects to a diet of mostly fruits. You may also notice them careening about, one individual in hot pursuit of another, for when robins find a good source of food while migrating, they will defend that food source from other robins until it is time to move on.

As the chill days of fall signal the robins of northern North America to migrate to the southern regions of the U.S., their favorite source of summer food, earthworms are making a migration of their own. Their direction however, is downward, deep into the soil. As the ground turns cold earthworms tunnel down below the frost line, sometimes balling up with as many as 100 others to reduce moisture loss. They will spend their winter inactive until the frost leaves the soil. In spring, when the average ground temperature reaches 36 degrees earthworms will begin to once again surface.

Astonishingly, male robins are able to detect when the mean temperature of the ground is about 37 degrees and this allows them to migrate north on the leading edge of the spring thaw, when large numbers of worms are just emerging from their vertical migration. The robins feast on the earthworms, which gives them plenty of protein and energy to set up their territories and prepare for courting female robins that are due to arrive several weeks later. By the time the females show up the earth is thawed and there is plenty of mud available for the business of nest building.

Robins spend their spring and summer keeping a sharp eye out for tasty worms or pesky insects, which they feed to their chicks, providing the important protein these young birds need to develop. As young birds fledge they roost with male robins. Then as the nesting season winds down females join with males and fledglings and flocks increase—their tastes switch back to fruit as they prepare for their journey southward.