

Robins, Robins Everywhere! Susan Heath

American Robins seem to be everywhere this winter and in large flocks. We normally get some robins along the coast in winter and they breed in Houston. But this year, there seems to be unprecedented numbers along the coast, at least with respect to recent history. Why are there so many?



American Robins range over the entire U.S. throughout the year and they are a hearty bird that can withstand quite cold temperatures. But during the winter, they become nomadic and will move in response to food resources. In the spring and summer, robins mostly feed on earthworms and they can be commonly seen foraging on lawns or in leaf litter where earthworms like to hang out.

During the winter though, the ground is frozen in much of the robin's range, so earthworms are mostly off the table. They switch their diet to fruit and go in search of trees and bushes that carry their fruit into the winter. Robins will also form large flocks in winter which roost together for warmth and provide a social network for foraging. "Hey I found a great yaupon bush with lots of berries – pass it on!"

This winter, a few things are happening that have caused all sorts of birds to be in all sorts of places where they wouldn't normally be. The fires and drought in the west likely drove many birds to leave the area for the winter as food resources recover there. This is also a major finch flight year meaning finches of all sorts are leaving the northern latitudes and coming south in search of food because it is either too cold, too snowy, too icy, or there is too little food to support them where they normally spend the winter.

Robins are likely reacting to these same food shortages where they normally winter. Their nomadic nature is sending them south in droves to spend the winter here where we usually have warmer temperatures (last week notwithstanding!) and thus more food resources.

Up north, a robin on your lawn is usually a harbinger of spring because it means they are searching for earthworms again instead of fruit. But along the Texas coast, a robin on your lawn is a winter treat to be enjoyed! They are fun to watch as they run along and then suddenly stop and dig their bill into the ground searching for a tasty treat.

Their calls are distinctive and if you listen you can hear them calling to each other with good news or bad. They can do a great job edging and cleaning the space between the slabs on your driveway too. We left our house one day last week and noticed a few robins on our lawn. When we returned every bit of soil had been removed from the cracks between the slabs and along the edges of our driveway and tossed aside in their diligent search for worms. All we had to do was sweep it up!

They are likely heading back north soon, so enjoy the feisty robins while you can. We aren't likely to have another invasion year like this for a while and I will miss their robin red breasts when they go!

Photo: By Susan Heath. An American Robin forages on the ground for earth worms or fallen fruit.