Wildlife watchers are noticing a flurry of activity as the weather cools. Creatures have natural abilities to tune into the weather and flee to safe shelter when it gets rough. It is hard for us, in the midst of the storm, to remember this is a pattern and it has been repeating cycles for eons. Fortunately, many animals have the ability to adapt and change with changing conditions. We can take some lessons.

This time of year, many wildlife enthusiasts don binoculars and head for the woods and waters to see migratory species that are moving to more moderate climates during our winter months. No, not just the snow-birds that fly south on Continental or Delta, but the ones that fly on their own power.

Sandhill cranes will arrive soon in large flocks and can be seen high overhead in dark ribbons of color across the sky. We have some that live here all year long, but the loud honking of the new arrivals will increase in lakeshore neighborhoods. Ducks, coots, cormorants, white pelicans, chimney swifts, warblers, tanagers, orioles and thrushes will also be moving through.

Migrants are easy to see in coastal areas and wetlands as well as in tree canopies. It will be interesting to see what happens when so much of the natural habitat has been altered because of wave and wind action and rising water as well a down trees and shrubs.

Conduct your own biological observations and see if there is more activity in your yard this year. The disturbance to natural areas and landscapes will force birds and animals to seek shelter in alternate places that still meet their needs for food, water, shelter and space. Your holly tree or ligustrum may be the tallest thing around to perch on and provide some great bird watching this winter.

Wildlife watching is a great activity to involve children and housebound family members. The University of Florida's Department of Wildlife Ecology and Conservation has established a public bird monitoring program that allow you to easily keep track of birds you see at home feeders, record them on the internet and share your information with others.

Other wildlife that is on the move includes monarch butterflies migrating south. Flying squirrels expand their range looking for winter food in pecan orchards. Since many fruits and nuts have been stripped from trees by hurricane winds, consider supplementing natural foods with feeders, but remember to replenish them with a variety of foods to attract a variety of wildlife. When selecting new landscape plants, choose ones that also provide food or homes for wildlife.

There has been a tremendous interested in wildlife watching among both foreign and domestic travelers. The Osceola County Convention and Visitor's Bureau recognized this fact and hired Abby Montpelier to help market Osceola's natural and historic resources as well as nature and cultural attractions. Jointly, with UF/IFAS Osceola County Extension and local business input, they have developed the colorful and informative Nature and Heritage Guide. Maps of parks, trails, and boat ramps and descriptions and information on local fish, birds and mammals are provided.

There is a trend nationally to look at wildlife needs and identify strategies for supporting and protecting existing populations. The key is to manage the resources (food, water, shelter and space) to maintain and enhance wildlife populations so they don’t become threatened or endangered. Kissimmee will host one of a series of meeting being held around the state to discuss strategies for conserving our Florida native animal species.

The Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission invites help from agencies, businesses and universities, as well as from groups and individuals concerned about conservation of fish and wildlife. The Commission is charged with leading discussions to develop a Comprehensive Wildlife Conservation
Strategy (CWCS).

The goal is to develop workable strategies for nation-wide conservation of habitat as opposed to single species management techniques that have been common in the past. Federal funding through the Conservation Trust Fund can then be made available to help us locally. From identifying threats and measuring the health of wildlife populations to involving locals, the FWC will be coordinating a variety of efforts to benefit wildlife.

The closest CWCS meeting will be held Wednesday, October 20, 6:30 - 8:30 pm at Osceola Heritage Park (OHP) Exhibition Hall Kissimmee A. OHP is located between Kissimmee and St. Cloud on Highway 192. Enter off Bill Beck Boulevard across from Gateway High School.

Don’t wait for the plan to help wildlife. Plant trees, shrubs, vines and groundcovers in your yard that provide food, rest and roosts. Contact our UF/IFAS Osceola County Extension office at 321-697-3000 or email oscmg@ifas.ufl.edu for more information on providing for wildlife needs as your repair and replant your damaged landscape.

Get hands on help with gardening through the new Community Wellness Garden program co-sponsored by UF/IFAS Osceola County Extension and Osceola County Health Department. Classes and garden plots are available by calling 321-697-3000. Learn to garden, make new friends and improve your health.

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