



Pennsylvania
**Department of Conservation
and Natural Resources**
Bureau of Forestry



Cuddle Time
by Jeff Woleslagle



"No Winter lasts forever; No Spring skips its turn"
Hal Borland



Two owls together in a tree cavity. (photo by: Souryadeep Mukherjee, Wikimedia Commons)

In harsh winters, I often look out at the birds in my yard and wonder how they can possibly cope with it. One strategy that some species employ is roosting together. Cuddling up to get through a long, frigid night can be the norm for some. Sharing sleeping space conserves heat and can prove vital to survival during extreme cold. Winter wrens, nuthatches, and bluebirds are species that will group together for the night, often in family units. Additionally, chickadees, screech owls, titmice, and some woodpecker species will utilize nest boxes to combat the cold. By grouping together in snags and nest boxes, birds create an environment that is much warmer than the ambient temperature.

Of course, birds have other strategies to fight the cold as well. Many species migrate to warmer climates and return with the warmth of spring. Some fluff their feathers to keep warm. This works to trap pockets of air around their bodies. The secret to maintaining these layers of warm air lies in having dry, clean, and flexible feathers. Have you ever noticed that a chickadee often looks twice as big in the wintertime? Some birds eat more in the winter and have a diet that is high in fat to maintain their metabolism. Some birds can drop their core temperature for a period of time, entering a state of hypothermia to save energy and survive.



Penguins huddling together. (photo by David Stanley, Wikimedia Commons)

Cuddling together though is a tried-and-true strategy for many. Emperor penguins are particularly well-known for their large huddles during harsh Antarctic winters. Of course, birds aren't the only ones that use community cavity roosting during bitter cold snaps. A dozen or more flying squirrels have been known to occupy a single nest box, and bats and sea lions are also noted for grouping together for thermo-regulation.

"In every cuddle, there's a drop of eternal reassurance."

Pamela Watson